



The
RED CROSS GIRLS
on the
FRENCH FIRING LINE

MARGARET VANDERCOOK

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Title: The Red Cross Girls on the French Firing Line

Author: Margaret Vandercook

Release date: September 8, 2019 [eBook #60265]

Most recently updated: October 17, 2024

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/60265

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THE RED CROSS GIRLS ON
THE FRENCH FIRING
LINE

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**CAPTAIN CASTAIGNE LAY HIDDEN UNDER A PILE OF
BED CLOTHES—(See [page 225](#))**

The Red Cross Girls On the French Firing Line

By
MARGARET VANDERCOOK

Author of "The Ranch Girls Series," "Stories
about Camp Fire Girls Series," etc.

Illustrated

The John C. Winston Company
Philadelphia



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THE RED CROSS GIRLS ON
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LINE

CHAPTER I

Place de l'Opera

Not long after the beginning of the war in Europe four American girls set sail from New York City to aid in the Red Cross nursing.

When they boarded the "Philadelphia" they were almost strangers to one another. And never were girls more unlike.

Eugenia Peabody, the oldest of the four, hailed from Massachusetts and appeared almost as stern and forbidding as the rock-bound coasts. Privately the others insisted in the early part of their acquaintance that this same Eugenia must have been born an "old maid."

Mildred Thornton was the daughter of a distinguished New York judge and her mother a prominent society woman. But Mildred herself cared little for a butterfly existence. With the call of the suffering sounding in her ears she had given up a luxurious existence for the hardships and perils of a Red Cross nurse.

The youngest of the four girls, Barbara Meade, was a very small person with a large store of energy and unexpectedness. And the last girl, Nona Davis, was a native of the conservative old city of Charleston, South Carolina. Although a mystery shadowed her mother's history, Nona had been brought up by her father, a one-time Confederate general, with all the ideas and traditions of the old South.

Yet in spite of these contrasts in their natures and lives, the four American Red Cross girls had spent more than six months caring for the wounded British soldiers in the Sacred Heart Hospital in northern France.

With the closing of the last story the news had come that the headquarters of the hospital must be changed at once. At any hour the German invaders might swarm into the countryside.

There had been but little time to remove the wounded. So, not wishing to add to the responsibilities and finding themselves more in the way than of service, the four girls had escaped together to a small town in France farther away from the enemy's line.

Here they concluded to offer their aid to the Croix de Rouge, or the Red Cross Society of France.

But this was in the spring, and now another autumn has come round.

One wonders what the four American girls are doing and where they are living.

The great square in front of the Grand Opera House in Paris surged with excited people.

Automobiles and carriages crowded with men and women, waving tri-colored flags, filled the streets. It was a warm October night with a brilliant canopy of stars overhead.

“Vive la France! Vive l’Armée!” the throng shouted, swaying backward and forward in its effort to draw closer to the great palace.

There must have been between five and ten thousand persons in the neighborhood, for tonight France was celebrating her greatest achievement of the war. At last the news had come that the victorious French army had driven the Germans back across the frontiers of Alsace-Lorraine. Once again the French flag was planted within their lost provinces.

“Allons, enfants, de la patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé.”

In the crowd a woman had started the singing of the *Marseillaise*. Immediately thousands of voices joined in the song, while thousands of feet kept time upon the paving stones to this greatest of all marching measures.

Six broad streets in Paris converge into a triangular square which is known as the Place de l’Opera. From here one looks upward to the opera house itself, a splendid building three stories in height and approached by a broad flight of stone steps.

Standing within the crowd, a little to the left of the opera, was a group of five persons, four of them girls, while the fifth was a young man whose coat

was buttoned in such a fashion that he appeared to have but one arm. However, the other arm hung limp and useless underneath his coat.

Although their appearance and accents were those of foreigners, two of the girls in the little party were singing along with the French crowd. The other two were silent, although their faces expressed equal interest and animation.

Suddenly the singing of the street crowd ceased. The central door of the opera house had been thrown open and a young woman came out upon the portico. She was dressed in a clinging white robe and wore upon her head a diadem of brilliants, while in her hands she carried the French flag. So skilfully had the lights been arranged behind her that she could be seen for a great distance. To the onlookers she represented the symbolic female figure of the great French Republic, “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.”

For a moment after her appearance there was a breathless silence, then the next even more enthusiastic shouts resounded:

“Vive Chenel! Vive Chenel!” Hats were thrown into the air, thousands of flags waved, while myriads of handkerchiefs fluttered like white doves.

It was a night to be always remembered by the people who shared its rapture.

“Aux armes, citoyens, formez vos bataillons!
Marchons! Marchons!”

With the closing of the final verse of the *Marseillaise*, in the midst of the wild applause, the smallest of the four girls in the little group placed her hand gently upon the armless sleeve of her young man companion.

“Tonight makes up for a good deal, doesn’t it, Dick?” she queried a little wistfully. As she spoke her blue eyes were shining with excitement, while a warm color flooded her cheeks.

The young fellow nodded. “It is the greatest spectacle I ever saw and one we shall never forget,” he replied. “Yet there will be a greater night to come when this war is finally over, though when that night will be no one can foretell.”

Dick Thornton spoke gravely and seemed weary from the evening’s excitement. But then something of what he had passed through in the last

six months showed in other ways than in his empty coat sleeve.

Without his knowledge, the girl who had been speaking continued to study him for another moment. Then she turned to Mildred Thornton, who was on her other side, and whispered:

“Mill, Dick is tired, but would rather die than confess it. Can’t you think of some way to get us out of this crowd before the breaking up begins? The jam then will be awful and we may not be able to keep together.”

Up to the instant of Barbara Meade’s suggestion, Mildred had forgotten all personal matters in her interest in the music and the vivid beauty of the scene surrounding them. Now she too glanced toward her brother.

“Dick,” she suggested at once, “don’t you think we had best start back toward our pension? Madame Chenel is to sing an encore and I’m sorry we must miss it, but I really think it would be more sensible to go.”

With the closing of the *Marseillaise* the celebrated singer had disappeared. Now in the midst of Mildred’s remark she returned to the balcony of the Opera House. No longer was she wearing her crown of brilliants, nor carrying the immense French flag. Instead her head was uncovered, showing her dark hair and eyes and the flag she bore was British, not French.

Then she began singing in English, but with a delicious French accent:

“It’s a long way to Tipperary,
It’s a long way to go.”

The crowd joined in the chorus. There were soldiers on the street, who had returned to Paris on leaves of absence, after learning English from the Tommies in the trenches. Others had only a faint knowledge of a few English words. But everybody sang, and because some of the voices were French and others English the effect was all the more thrilling and amusing.

Naturally Dick hesitated for a moment, then he remembered his own condition. Certainly he would be powerless to push their way through the great throng. Then if by chance rioting should break out from sheer excitement, it would be impossible for him to protect four girls. True, the American Red Cross girls were fairly well able to look after themselves in

most emergencies. But Dick Thornton did not like the idea of having them put to the test at such a time and under the present circumstances.

“I am afraid you are right, Mildred,” he agreed reluctantly. “Let’s form a single file; I’ll go first and all of you follow me. Tell the others.”

Mildred at once put her arm inside a young woman’s who was standing near her, apparently oblivious of the past conversation. Yet one would have expected Eugenia Peabody to have been first to have made the sensible suggestion of the past few moments. Yet it was Barbara Meade with whom it had actually originated.

But Eugenia too had been swept off her feet with enthusiasm. Moreover, she could scarcely make up her mind now to agree to leave, although plainly appreciating the situation. Eugenia looked surprisingly handsome tonight.

In the first place, she wore a new Paris frock, which after long insistence the other three girls had persuaded her to buy. It was an inexpensive dress of dark-blue cloth and silk, but it was stylishly made and extremely becoming. Above all, Eugenia had at last discarded the unattractive hat in which she had set sail, and which she had resolutely worn until this day. The new one had only cost five francs, but one should see the character of hat that can be bought in Paris for one dollar!

Eugenia, it is true, had begrudged even that small amount for her own adornment, until Nona and Barbara had refused to appear upon the street with her still in her ancient “Alpine.” However, although she rebelled against the unnecessary extravagance, so far Eugenia had not regretted her purchases.

At the present moment she was standing next to Nona Davis and turned to speak to her.

“Nona, I am sorry when it’s all so wonderful, but we must start back to the pension at once. Please come on,” she insisted authoritatively.

And Eugenia had every reason to believe that Nona heard her words and agreed with her. She even thought that Nona moved on a few paces behind her. Moreover, this is exactly what she did. Nevertheless, Nona afterwards insisted that her act must have been purely involuntary, since she was not conscious of having heard or obeyed her companion.

If the little group of five Americans had been enthralled by the night's excitement, it was Nona Davis who was most completely swept off her feet. Never had she even dreamed of such beauty and glamour as this gala night in Paris offered!

So little even of her own land had Nona seen, nothing save Charleston and the surrounding neighborhood and the view from her car window on her way to New York City.

The few days in London had been overhung with the thought of the work ahead. But here in Paris for the past week the four Red Cross girls had been enjoying a brief holiday and were completely under the spell of the fascinating and beautiful city.

Upon persons with a far wider experience of life and places than Nona Davis, Paris frequently casts this same spell. Indeed, it sometimes seems impossible that a city can be so beautiful and yet suited to the uses of everyday life. Both in Paris and in Venice one often expects to wake up and find the city a dream and not a reality.

Certainly Nona had turned automatically to do as Eugenia had commanded her. But unfortunately, at the same moment Madame Chenel finished her English song and began at once on another which by an odd chance had a reminiscent quality for Nona. Instinctively she paused to listen and remember.

Her impression of the song was one of long ago. Nona's mother had once been in New Orleans. Now the vision came to her daughter of an old-fashioned spinet at one end of the drawing room in her home in Charleston, and of a young woman in a white dress with blue ribbons sitting there singing this same French verse.

For the moment everything else was forgotten. The girl simply stood spellbound until the great artist finished. Only when she began bowing her thanks to the applauding crowd, did Nona turn again to look for Eugenia and her other friends. But as more than five minutes had passed since their warning, and as they had believed Nona following them, no one of the four could be seen.

Moreover, at this same moment the great crowd began to break up. Then, as is always the case, everybody struggled to get away at the same moment.

Just at first Nona was not alarmed at finding herself alone; she was simply bewildered. However, because she was endeavoring to stand still while every one else was moving, she was constantly being shoved from side to side.

Her first intention was to remain in the same place for a few moments. Then Dick or one of the girls would probably return for her. However, she soon appreciated that no human being could push their way back through the thronging multitude. Moreover, she too must move along or be trampled upon.

Fortunately, the fact that she was alone did not seem to have been observed. For although the people in her neighborhood were not rough and ugly, as an English or Teutonic crowd might have been, nevertheless, Nona knew that for a young girl to be alone at night in the streets of Paris was an unheard-of thing. Besides, later on the crowd might indulge in noisier ways of celebrating the German defeat than by listening to the singing of the great prima donna.

What had she best do? As she was being pushed along, Nona was also thinking rapidly, although somewhat confusedly. She had not been on the street alone since her arrival. Both Mildred and Dick Thornton were familiar with Paris and had been acting as the others' escorts.

Their little French pension happened to be over on the other side of Paris. Fortunately, Nona remembered that she could find a bus near the Madeleine, the famous church not more than a dozen blocks away from the neighborhood of the opera. But how to reach this destination and what bus to take after her arrival? These were problems still to be dealt with. First of all, she must keep her forlorn condition a secret from observers in order not to be spoken to by an impertinent stranger.

Naturally Nona appreciated that it was impossible for all Frenchmen to be equally courteous. Therefore, one of them might misunderstand her present predicament.

However, as there was nothing else to do she continued moving with the crowd. In the meantime she kept assuring herself that it was absurd to be so nervous over an ordinary adventure. Think what experiences she had so lately passed through as a Red Cross nurse!

But if she had only been wearing her nurse's uniform, always it served as a protection! Yet naturally when one was off duty and merely a holiday visitor in a city, it was pleasanter to dress like other persons.

Like Eugenia, Nona was also wearing a new frock. Hers was of black silk with a hat of black tulle, making her fair hair and skin more conspicuous by contrast. Certainly she would be apt to attract attention among the darker, more vividly colored French girls.

But Nona had gone half the distance to the Madeleine before she was annoyed. Then just as she was about to cross the street at one of the corners, an arm was unexpectedly slipped through hers.

With her heart pounding with terror and every bit of color drained from her cheeks, Nona looked up into the eyes of an impertinent youth.

"La belle Americaine!" he announced insolently.

CHAPTER II

Another Meeting

The next instant Nona recovered her poise. She was, however, both frightened and angry. Yet if it were possible to avoid it, she did not wish to raise an alarm nor create any kind of commotion upon the street.

At first quietly and firmly she attempted removing her arm, at the same time regarding the Frenchman with an expression of scorn and disapproval.

“Let me go at once,” she said, speaking excellent French, so there was no possibility of being misunderstood.

But the young man only shrugged his shoulders, looking, if she had but known it, more mischievous than wicked.

But Nona was now gazing despairingly about her. There were numbers of persons near by, stout mothers and fathers, the respectable tradespeople of Paris, with the usual French family of two children. Nona could, of course, appeal to any one of them. But just at the instant no one was sufficiently near to accost without raising her voice. This would, of course, attract public attention, which, if possible, Nona did not wish to do.

So she waited another second, hoping her tormentor would release her of his own accord. Finding he did not intend this, she glanced about for assistance a second time. Then she discovered two young officers passing within a few feet of her. One of them wore a British uniform and the other French.

Nona spoke quickly, knowing instinctively that the men were gentlemen.

“Stop a moment, please!” she asked. “I am a stranger and have lost my friends in the crowd. This man is annoying me.”

Then in spite of her efforts the girl’s voice shook with nervousness while her eyes filled with humiliated tears.

With her first words the two officers whirled around. At the same moment Nona’s persecutor started to run. However, he was not quick enough, for the young French officer managed to slip his scabbard between the fellow’s

feet. At once he was face down on the ground and only brought upright again by the officer's hand on his collar.

In the interval the other young man was gazing at Nona Davis in surprise and perhaps with something like pleasure.

"Miss Davis," he began, lifting his officer's cap formally, "are we never to meet except under extraordinary circumstances? You may not remember me, but I am Lieutenant Hume, Colonel Dalton's aide. Perhaps you recall that unfortunate affair in which Miss Thornton was concerned at the Sacred Heart Hospital? But before that you know there was our first meeting at the gardener's cottage in Surrey."

It was unnecessary for Lieutenant Hume to present Nona with all his credentials of acquaintance. For at this instant she was too unreservedly glad to see him. To have discovered some one whom she knew at such a trying time was an unexpected boon.

"I am, you see—oh, I can't explain now," Nona protested. "But, Lieutenant Hume, if you have nothing very important to do, won't you be kind enough to put me on the right bus. I am trying to get back to our pension. And though I am sorry to be so stupid, I am lost and dreadfully frightened."

The hand that Nona now extended to her English acquaintance was cold with nervousness.

Lieutenant Hume took it and bowed courteously. "Of course I will take you home with the greatest pleasure," he returned. At the same time he smiled to himself:

"Girls are indeed strange creatures, say what you will! Here is a young American girl who has been doing Red Cross work near the battlefield. She has been able to keep her head and remain cool and collected among war's horrors, but because she has been spoken to on the street by a young ruffian she is terrified and confused." Possibly she would have scorned his protection in the face of an artillery charge, when under the present conditions a masculine protector was fairly useful.

Now for the first time the young French officer spoke. He had just given his captive a rough shake and then straightened him up again after a second attempt to get away.

“What shall I do with this fellow, Mademoiselle?” he asked, speaking English with difficulty, but showing extraordinarily white, even teeth under a small, dark moustache. Indeed, Nona decided that she had never seen a more charming and debonair figure than the young French officer, when he finally engaged her attention. He could scarcely have been more than five feet, four inches tall, yet his figure was perfectly built. He was slender, but from the casual fashion in which he gripped the other man, who was several inches taller and far heavier, he must have been extraordinarily strong.

“Oh, let the man go, please,” Nona murmured weakly. “Yes, I know I should have you turn him over to a gendarme and appear against him in court, but really I should hate doing it.”

The girl smiled at the young French officer’s evident disappointment. He made no protest, however; only he gave the man another half-savage shake and said rapidly in French:

“Why aren’t you with the army, you miserable loafer? Your name at once?” Then, when the offender mumbled something indistinguishable: “Report to me at the barracks tomorrow. Oh, I shall find you again, never fear, and it will then be imprisonment for you.”

The moment after the man had run away the French officer stood at attention with his shoulders erect and his feet together. The next he bowed to Nona in an exquisitely correct fashion, as Lieutenant Hume introduced him.

“Miss Davis, my friend, Captain Henri Castaigne, one of the youngest captains in the French army.” Lieutenant Hume then added boyishly: “Tomorrow he is to be presented with the Cross of the Legion of Honor.”

Nona was naturally impressed by such an introduction. But evidently the young officer preferred not having his praises sung to a complete stranger. He pretended not even to have heard his friend’s last remark.

“I will say au revoir,” he returned graciously. “Since you and Lieutenant Hume are old acquaintances, he will prefer to take you to your friends unaccompanied by me.”

He was about to withdraw when Nona interposed.

“But you must have had some engagement together for the evening. Now if you separate on my account your evening will be spoiled. So please don’t trouble to take me all the way to the pension; just find my omnibus and _____”

Both young men laughed. The idea of leaving a girl alone in such an extremity was of course an absurdity.

“Oh, come along, Henri, Miss Davis will be able to endure your society for a few moments as long as I was braced to endure it all evening.” Lieutenant Hume added: “Besides, it may help your education to talk to an American girl. Castaigne does not know a thing except military tactics; he is rather a duffer,” the English officer continued half proudly and half with a pretense of contempt. It was not difficult to discover that there was a good deal of affection existing between the two young officers of the Allied armies.

Nona wondered how they happened to know each other so intimately.

“By the way, Lieutenant Hume,” she asked, when they had finally reached the desired square and stood waiting their turn on the overcrowded omnibus. “How in the world do you chance to be in Paris instead of at the front? The last time I heard of you, you were in the midst of desperate fighting.”

The young man answered so quietly that no one except his two companions could hear. “I am in Paris on a private mission for the British Government. I am not at liberty to say anything more.”

Nona flushed, a little confused at having appeared to be curious when she had only meant to be friendly. But immediately Lieutenant Hume inquired:

“May I ask the same question of you? How do you chance to be in Paris? Did you come here after the Sacred Heart Hospital was closed? I knew that one side of it had been struck by a shell and partly destroyed.”

Nona nodded. “Yes, but let us not talk of that now, if you don’t mind. We had to move the wounded soldiers, the supplies and everything in a tremendous hurry. So we are resting now for a short time and afterwards mean to go into southern France to help with the hospital work there. But hasn’t tonight’s celebration been too wonderful? It is the very first victory I have ever helped to celebrate and it has made me very happy.”

“Then you are not entirely neutral, as you Americans are supposed to be?” Lieutenant Hume queried, waiting with more interest than was natural for his companion’s reply. “I thought Red Cross doctors and nurses were expected to have no feeling about the war.”

Nona hesitated. “Of course, that is true so far as our nursing goes,” she replied. “Naturally I would nurse any soldier without its making the least difference what his nationality might be. But when it comes to a question of my own personal feeling, well, that is a different matter.”

Nona’s answer was a little incoherent; nevertheless, her companion seemed to find it satisfactory.

On arriving at the pension Eugenia herself opened the door. The concierge had previously admitted the girl and her two escorts to the ground floor.

The apartment where the four girls and Dick Thornton were at present boarding occupied the third floor of an old house that had once belonged to an ancient French family and had afterwards been converted into an apartment building. Such houses are common in Paris. The atmosphere of this one was gloomy and imposing and the hallway very dark.

At first Eugenia only saw Nona outside or she might have been more amiable. However, she had been so frightened for the past hour that she was thoroughly angry, an effect fright often has upon people.

“Nona, what does this mean?” she demanded, speaking like an outraged school-marm. “You have given us one of the worst hours any one of us has ever spent. Why did you not come along with the rest of us? Of course, no one wished to leave; it was quite as much of a sacrifice for us as for you. Now Mildred and Barbara and Dick have had to go back to look for you and to inform the police of your disappearance. I have waited here, hoping for a message from them or you.”

“Yes, I know. I am dreadfully sorry,” Nona replied more apologetically than she actually felt. Naturally regretting the trouble she had given, yet she did not enjoy being scolded before entire strangers.

“Eugenia,” she protested, changing the tone of her voice in an effort to stem the tide of her friend’s resentment, “I was so fortunate as to meet Lieutenant Hume on the street. You may recall he was Colonel Dalton’s companion

when he visited the Sacred Heart Hospital. He and his friend have been good enough to bring me home. I should like to have you meet them.”

Certainly Eugenia was somewhat nonplussed on discovering that there had been an audience to overhear her reproaches. Still she was no less offended. However, she could not exactly make up her mind to refuse to be introduced to Nona’s acquaintances, who had undoubtedly been kind.

The result was that she was stiffer and colder than ever before as she stalked ahead into the pension drawing room, leaving the younger girl and the two men to follow her.

Moreover, Eugenia undoubtedly looked plain, partly as the result of her severe mood and partly of her fatigue and anxiety. She had removed her street suit and was wearing a gray frock that might have been cut out by the village carpenter, so free was it from any possible grace or prettiness. The dress had been intended to be useful and undoubtedly had been, for Eugenia must have been wearing it for the past five years.

But Eugenia really believed that she was fairly gracious to the two young officers. She shook hands with both of them and asked them to be seated. She even thanked them for escorting the scapegrace home, yet all in a manner that suggested ice trying to thaw on an impossibly cold day.

Lieutenant Hume paid but little attention to her, being frankly too much interested in Nona Davis to do more than be polite to Miss Peabody, whom he regarded strictly in the light of a chaperon.

But to Captain Castaigne Eugenia was at once a puzzle and an amusement. In his life he had never seen any one in the least like her.

The young French officer belonged to an old and aristocratic French family. Had France remained a monarchy instead of becoming a republic, he would have held a distinguished title. He was not a native of Paris, for he had been brought up in the country with his mother upon their impoverished estate. Later, as she considered a soldier’s life the only one possible for her son, he had attended a military school for officers. So it was true that he knew but little of women. However, those he had met previously had been his mother’s friends and their daughters. They were women with charming, gracious manners, of unusual culture and refinement. Moreover, they had always been extremely kind to him. Now this remarkable young American

woman paid no more attention to him than if he had been a wooden figure, and perhaps not so much. Her appearance and manner recalled an officer whom he had once had as a teacher. His colonel had been just such a tall, stern person, who having given his orders expected them to be obeyed without demur. So the young French officer was torn between his desire to laugh, which of course his perfect manners made impossible, and his desire to offer this Miss Peabody a military salute.

She spoke the most extraordinary French he had ever heard in his life. Her grammar was possibly correct, but such another accent had never been listened to on sea or land. Captain Castaigne was not familiar with Americans, so how could he know that Eugenia spoke French with a Boston intonation?

Ten, fifteen minutes elapsed, while conversation between Eugenia and the French officer became more and more impossible. Nevertheless his friend failed to regard Captain Castaigne's imploring glances.

At last the English officer realized that their call was becoming unduly long under the circumstances. Yet before saying farewell he managed a few moments of confidential conversation with Nona.

"You will persuade your friends to come to the Review tomorrow? I shall call for you more than an hour ahead of time. President Poincaré himself is to present decorations to a dozen soldiers. I say it would be rotten for you to miss it."

Undoubtedly Nona agreed with him. "You are awfully kind. I accept for us all with pleasure and shall look forward then to tomorrow," she returned. "Thank you again for tonight, and good-by."

CHAPTER III

The Cross of the Legion of Honor

That night just before falling asleep Nona Davis had an unexpected flash of thought. It was odd that Lieutenant Hume, who had been a friend in need, should turn out to be such a well-educated and attractive fellow. Moreover, how did it happen that he was a British officer? Now and then for some especial act of valor, or for some especial ability, a man was raised from the ranks. Yet Nona did not believe either of these things to have happened in Lieutenant Hume's case.

What was the answer to the puzzle? He was the son of a gardener and she herself had seen his mother Susan, a comfortable old lady with twinkling brown eyes, red cheeks, a large bosom and a round waist to match. Surely it was difficult to conceive of *her* as the mother of such a son! And especially in England where it was so difficult to rise above one's environment.

Although tired and sleepy, Nona devoted another ten minutes to her riddle. Then all at once the answer appeared plain enough. Lieutenant Hume had doubtless been brought up as the foster brother of a boy of nobler birth and greater riches than he himself possessed. Then, doubtless, seeing his unusual abilities, he had been given unusual opportunities. Nona had read English novels in which just such interesting situations occurred, so she felt rather pleased with her own discernment. However, if it were possible to introduce the subject without being rude, she intended to make sure of her impression by questioning Lieutenant Hume. One might so easily begin by discussing English literature, a subject certainly broad enough in itself. Then one could mention a particular book, where a foster brother played a conspicuous part. But while trying to recall a story with just the exact situation she required, Nona went to sleep.

She and Barbara shared the same room. But fortunately no one of her other friends had been so severe as Eugenia. However, after the departure of the two young men, realizing that she had been tiresome, Nona had been sufficiently contrite to appease even Eugenia.

The next morning at *déjeuner* Dick Thornton declared that Nona's adventure had really resulted in good fortune for all of them. More than most things he had desired to attend the review of the fresh troops about to leave Paris for the firing line. Moreover, it would be uncommonly interesting to see the presentation of the decorations by the French President. And if Nona had not chanced to meet Lieutenant Hume and his friend, neither of these opportunities would have been theirs. Dick had no chance of securing the special invitations and tickets necessary for seats in the reviewing stand. Privately Dick had intended escaping from the four girls to witness the scene alone. But now as Lieutenant Hume had invited all of them it would be unnecessary to make this confession.

The review was to take place on a level stretch of country just outside Paris between St. Cloud and the Bois.

Having in some magical fashion secured two antiquated taxicabs, Lieutenant Hume arrived next day at the pension. He and Nona and Eugenia started off in one of them, with Barbara, Mildred and Dick in the other.

During the ride into the country Lieutenant Hume talked the greater part of the time about his friend, Captain Castaigne, whom Nona and Eugenia had met the evening before. The two men had only known each other since the outbreak of the war, yet a devoted friendship had developed between them.

Indeed, Nona smiled to herself over Lieutenant Hume's enthusiasm; it was so unlike an Englishman to reveal such deep feeling. But for the time being Captain Henri Castaigne was one of the idols of Paris. The day's newspapers were full of the gallant deed that had won him the right to the military order France holds most dear, "The Cross of the Legion of Honor."

Nevertheless, during the early part of the conversation Eugenia scarcely listened. She was too busily and happily engaged in watching the sights about her. Paris was having a curious effect upon the New England girl, one that she did not exactly understand. She was both shocked and fascinated by it.

In the first place, she had not anticipated liking Paris. She had only consented to make the trip because they were in need of rest and the other girls had chosen Paris. Everything she had ever heard or read concerning Paris had made her feel prejudiced against the city. Moreover, it was totally

unlike Eastport, Massachusetts, where Eugenia had been born and bred and where she had received most of her ideas of life.

Yet there was no denying that there was something about Paris that took hold even of Eugenia Peabody's repressed imagination.

It was a brilliant autumn afternoon. The taxicab rattled along the Champs Elysées, under the marvelous Arc de Triomphe and then turned into the wooded spaces of the Bois.

Every now and then Eugenia found a lump rising in her throat and her heart beating curiously fast. It was all so beautiful, both in art and nature. Surely it was impossible to believe that there could be an enemy mad enough to destroy a city that could never be restored to its former loveliness.

Perchance the war had purified Paris, taking away its uglier side in the healing influence of patriotism. For even Eugenia's New England eyes and conscience could find but little to criticize. Naturally many of the costumes worn by the young women she considered reprehensible. The colors were too bright, the skirts were too short. French women were really too stylish for her severer tastes. For there was little black to be seen. This was a gala afternoon, so whatever one's personal sorrow, today Paris honored the living.

Before Eugenia consented to listen Lieutenant Hume had arrived in the middle of his story, and then she listened only half-heartedly. She was interested chiefly because the young Captain she had met the evening before was so far from one's idea of a hero. He was more like a figure of a manikin dressed to represent an officer and set up in a shop window. His features were too perfect, he was too graceful, too debonair! But in truth Eugenia's idea of a soldier must still have been represented by the type of man who, shouldering a musket and still in his farmer's clothes, marched out to meet the enemy at Bunker Hill.

Some day Eugenia would learn that it takes all manner of men and women to make a world. And that there are worthwhile people and things that do not come from Boston.

"He was in the face of the enemy's fire when a shell exploded under his horse," Lieutenant Hume explained. "He and the horse were shot twenty feet in the air. When they came down to earth again there was an immense

hole in the ground beneath them and both man and horse were plunged into it. Rather like having one's grave dug ahead of time, isn't it?"

Nona nodded, leaning across from her seat in the cab with her golden brown eyes darkening with excitement and her hands clasped tight together in her lap.

Eugenia kept her eyes upon her even while giving her attention to the narrative. Personally she considered Nona unusually pretty and attractive and the idea worried her now and then. For there were to be no romances if she could prevent them while the four American Red Cross girls were in Europe. If they wished such undesirable possessions as husbands they must wait and marry their own countrymen.

"But Captain Castaigne was not hurt? So he still managed to carry the messages to his General?" Nona demanded. She was much interested in getting the details of the story before seeing its hero again.

Robert Hume was talking quietly. Nevertheless it was self-evident that he was only pretending to his casual tone.

"Of course Captain Castaigne was injured. There would have been no reason why any notice should have been taken of him if he had only done his ordinary duty. Fact is, when he crawled out he was covered with blood and nearly dead. The horse was killed outright and Henri almost so. Nevertheless he managed to run on foot under heavy fire to headquarters with his message. No one knows how he accomplished it and he knows least of all. He simply is the kind of fellow who does the thing he starts out to do. We Anglo-Saxons don't always understand the iron purpose under the charm and good looks these French fellows have. But fortunately we don't often use cavalymen now for carrying despatches. Motor cars do the work better when there is no telephone connection."

"Yes, and I'm truly glad," Nona murmured softly. She was thinking of how many gallant young cavalry officers both in France and England those first terrible months of the war had cut down, before the lessons of the new warfare had been learned.

But Eugenia had now awakened to a slight interest in the conversation.

"Your young friend looks fit enough now," she remarked dryly.

The English officer was not pleased with Eugenia's tone. "Nevertheless, Captain Castaigne has been dangerously ill in a hospital for many months, although he is returning to his regiment tomorrow."

After this speech there was no further opportunity for conversation. The two cabs had driven through the Bois and were now in sight of the field where the review was to be held.

Drawn up at the left were two new regiments about to depart for the front. Most of the soldiers were boys of nineteen who would have finished their terms of military service in the following year, but because of necessity were answering France's call today. They were wearing the new French uniform of gray, which is made for real service, and not the old-fashioned one with the dark-blue coat and crimson trousers. These too often formed conspicuous targets for the enemy's guns.

Across from the recruits stood another line of about fifty men. They were old men with gray hair. If their shoulders were still erect and their heads up it was not because this was now their familiar carriage. It was because this great day had inspired them. For they were the old soldiers who had been gallant fighters in 1870, when France had fought her other war with Germany. Now they were too old to be sent to the firing line. Nevertheless, each one of them was privately armed and ready to defend his beloved Paris to the last gasp should the enemy again come to possess it.

Between the two lines and on horseback were President Poincaré, France's new war minister and half a dozen other members of the Cabinet.

Then standing in a small group separated from the others were the soldiers who were about to be decorated for especial bravery.

While Lieutenant Hume was struggling to find places for his guests, Nona was vainly endeavoring to discover the young French officer whom she had met so unexpectedly the evening before. She was anxious to point him out to Mildred and Dick and Barbara.

But after they were seated it was Eugenia who found him first. Captain Castaigne was wearing an ordinary service uniform with no other decorations besides the emblems of his rank.

Then a few moments later President Poincaré and his staff dismounted.

The four American girls were distinctly disappointed by the French President's appearance. He is a small, stout man with a beard, very middle class and uninteresting looking. Yet he has managed to hold France together in times of peace and of war.

This was indeed a great day for Paris. Rarely are medals for bravery bestowed upon the soldiers save near the scene of battle by the officers in command. Yet there was little noise and shouting among the crowd as there had been the evening before. They were unusually silent, the women and girls not trying now to keep back the tears.

Sixty-four buglers sounded a salute. Then President Poincaré marched forward and shook hands with every soldier in the group of twelve. Eleven of them were to receive the new French decoration which is known as the "Croix de Guerre." This is a medal formed of two crossed swords and having a profile of a figure representing the French Republic in the center. But Captain Castaigne alone was to be honored with the Cross of the Legion of Honor.

First President Poincaré pinned the medal on the breast of a boy sentry. He had stood at the mouth of a trench as the Germans approached, and though wounded in half a dozen places had continued to fire until his companions had been warned of the attack.

Then one after the other each soldier received his country's thanks and the recognition of his especial bravery until at length President Poincaré came to young Captain Castaigne.

One does not know exactly what it was in the young man's appearance that touched the older man. Perhaps when you learn to know more of his character you will be better able to understand. For after the President had bestowed the higher decoration upon the young captain, he leaned over and kissed him.

Eugenia Peabody had an excellent view of the entire proceeding. Though her lips curled sarcastically, strangely enough her eyes felt absurdly misty. She much disliked this French custom of the men kissing each other, for Eugenia believed very little in kissing between either men or women. Nevertheless, she did feel disturbed by the whole performance, and hoped that her friends were too much engaged to pay attention to her. Above all

things Eugenia desired that Barbara Meade should not observe her weakness. She knew Barbara would never grow weary hereafter of referring to the amazement of Eugenia's giving way to tears in public and without any possible excuse.

Ten minutes later the review began with a blare of trumpets. Then gravely the new regiments passed before the President and his officers. Afterwards they marched away until a cloud of dust hid them and there was nothing for the spectators to do but return to their own homes.

Nevertheless, the young French Captain managed to make his way to his English friend. He appeared as indifferent and as debonair as he had the evening before. One could never have guessed that he had just received the greatest honor of his life, and an honor given to but few men.

Reference to his decoration he pretended not to be able to understand, although Mildred, Barbara and Dick tried to compliment him with their best school French.

But beyond inclining her head frostily, Eugenia made no attempt at a further acquaintance with the young soldier.

However, several times when he believed no one was observing him, Captain Castaigne stole a furtive glance at Eugenia.

She was somewhat better looking than she had been the evening before, yet she was by no means a beauty. Moreover, she was still a puzzle.

Then the boy—for after all he was only twenty-three—swallowed a laugh. At last he had found a real place for Eugenia. No wonder he had thought of his former colonel. Recently he had learned that a regiment of women in Paris were in training as soldiers. He could readily behold Eugenia in command.

The other three American girls were charming and he was glad to have met them. But Eugenia he trusted he might never see again. He was glad to be returning to the firing line next day. Let heaven preserve him from further acquaintance with such an unattractive person!

CHAPTER IV

On the Roof

One week longer the American Red Cross girls remained in Paris. They were only tourists for these brief, passing days. Yet all the while they were waiting for orders. After having nursed the British soldiers for a number of months, when the Sacred Heart Hospital was no longer in existence, they had concluded to offer their services to France.

Therefore, like soldiers, they also were ready upon short notice to start for the front. But in the meantime there was Paris to be investigated, where the October days were like jewels. One saw all that it was humanly possible to see of pictures and people and parks and then came home to dream of the statues in the Luxembourg, or of Venus in her shaded corner in the Louvre, or else of the figure of Victory midway up the Louvre's central staircase.

To one another the girls confessed that it was difficult to think of war so near at hand, or of the experiences through which they had so lately passed. Yet one saw the streets full of soldiers and knew that a great line of fortifications encircled Paris, such as few cities have ever had in the world's history. Also, there were always guns mounted on high towers waiting for the coming of the Zeppelin raid.

"Then one night, as luck would have it," Barbara insisted, "the raid came just in the nick of time. For how could the Germans have dreamed that we were leaving for southern France the next morning?"

Nevertheless, the luggage of the Red Cross girls was actually packed and in spite of war times the girls had added to the amount. Moreover, they were due to take the ten o'clock train next day at the Gare de Lyons. So because they were weary, a little sorry at having to leave Paris, and yet curious of the new adventures ahead, the four girls retired early.

In one way Paris has conspicuously changed since the outbreak of the war. She has become an early-to-bed city and except on special occasions her cafés are all closed after dark.

So Dick Thornton, although not leaving with the girls the next day, found little to amuse him on the same evening. He had said good-night soon after dinner and then gone for a long walk. For in truth he did not wish to have an intimate farewell talk with his sister or any one of her friends.

The hazards of war had used Dick pretty severely. He had not come to Europe to act as a soldier; nevertheless, in a tragically short time, before he had even begun to be fairly useful, he had paid a cruel penalty. Dick believed that he would never again be able to use his right arm.

He did not intend, however, to allow this to make him morose or disagreeable and so seldom spoke of it. But now and then he used to desert his four feminine companions and walking through the semi-darkened streets of Paris try to work out a solution for his future.

So by chance it was Dick who gave the alarm to the household on the night of Paris' long-anticipated Zeppelin raid.

He had just come home and was standing idly before the door waiting to awaken the concierge who presides over the destinies of all Parisian apartment houses. A beautiful night, the sky was thickly studded with stars, although there was no moon.

Suddenly Dick heard a tremendous explosion. Naturally his first thought was a bomb and then he smiled at himself. In war times every noise suggested a bomb. This noise may have been nothing but an unusually loud automobile tire explosion. However, Dick was not particularly convinced by his own suggestion. He remained quiet for another moment with all his senses acute. The streets in his neighborhood had been well-nigh deserted at the moment of the shock. If it were nothing they would still continue so. A brief time only was necessary for finding out. For an instant later windows were thrown open and every variety of heads thrust forth with eyes upturned toward the sky.

Then a fire engine rattled by and afar off a bugle call sounded.

That moment Dick pounded at the closed door of their house, but the concierge was already awake and let him in at once. Then with a few bounds he cleared the steps and stood knocking at his sister's bedroom door.

“Something startling is happening, I don’t know exactly what,” he announced hurriedly. “But you girls had best get on some clothes and come out. I am going up on the roof. If it is a Zeppelin raid the city officials have warned people to go down to the cellars. I’ll let you know in half a minute.”

But in half a minute Dick did not return. There seemed to be no danger for the present at least, and besides he had a masculine contempt for the length of time it takes girls to put on their clothes, even in times of emergency. Moreover, he kept staring up at the heavens too entranced by the spectacle to think of danger.

Five Zeppelins were passing over Paris, the projectiles which they dropped in passing leaving long trails of light behind them.

Soon after a small voice spoke at Dick’s elbow: “It’s wonderful, isn’t it? When I was a little girl I could never have believed that I should see real fireworks like these.”

Without glancing around Dick naturally recognized the voice. It always amused him to hear Barbara talk of the days when she was little, as she appeared so far from anything else even now.

“You had better go downstairs, little girl, with the other girls,” he commanded. “Yes, it is a wonderful spectacle, but this is no place for you.”

Then hearing her laugh lightly, he did turn around. Assuredly Barbara could not go down to the other girls, since they were assembled on the roof with her, and not only the girls but a third of the people in the pension. They were all talking at once in French fashion.

Dick felt rather helpless.

“I thought I told you to go to the cellar,” he protested. But Barbara paid not the slightest attention to him and the other girls were out of hearing.

She was clutching his left arm excitedly.

Now they could see the aeroplanes that had come out for the defense of Paris circling overhead and firing upon the Zeppelins and farther off in the distance the thunder of cannon could be heard.

“Paris is being wonderfully good to us, isn’t she?” Barbara whispered. “We keep seeing more and more amazing things.”

Dick scoffed. "I thought you pretended to be a coward, Barbara, though it is difficult for me to think of you as one."

And to this the girl made no answer except, "I don't believe any one in Paris is seriously frightened. A raid is not the terrible thing everybody feared, at least not one like this."

But Dick was not so readily convinced. There was a chance that these first air raiders were but scouts of the great army of German Zeppelins that London and Paris have both been dreading since the outbreak of the war.

Moreover, Dick was not alone in this idea. He could see now that the tops of all the large houses and hotels in the neighborhood, as far as one could discern, were thronged with as curious a crowd as his own. And from the streets below chatter and laughter and now and then cries of terror or admiration floated upward.

Of course, there were many persons in Paris that night wiser or at least more prudent than the four American Red Cross girls, and there were a number of places where proper precautions were taken. However, no one thought of going to bed again.

By and by the three other girls joined Barbara and Dick. But now there was nothing more to be seen save the stars in the sky which were too eternal to be appreciated. So when the noise of the cannonading had at last died away, Madame Raffet, who had charge of the pension, asked her guests to come down into the drawing room for coffee.

The girls were cold and dismal now that the excitement had passed and were glad enough of the invitation. Dick Thornton, however, resolutely declined to join them. He was still not in the mood for cheerful society, although he did not offer this excuse. He merely said that he always had wished to see the dawn steal over Paris and here was the opportunity of a lifetime, since the dawn must break now in a short while.

It may be that Barbara Meade guessed something of her friend's humor, for she went quietly away with the other girls, not joining her protests with theirs over Dick's unusual obstinacy.

An hour and a half passed, perhaps longer. Dick had found a seat on a stone ledge between two tall chimney stacks. It was a long, cold bench and he was growing rather tired of his bargain. Still, there was a grayness over

things now and daylight must soon follow. Yet he was sorry he had not gone downstairs with the others; it would have been an easy enough business to have returned to his perch later and coffee would undoubtedly have been a boon.

He was kicking his feet rather more like a disconsolate small boy, who had been sent upstairs to his room alone for punishment, than like a romantic youth about to pay tribute to his Mistress Paris, when Barbara Meade joined him for the second time that evening.

However, this time he saw her coming and her welcome was far more enthusiastic.

The girl had put on her long gray-blue nursing coat, but wore a ridiculous little blue silk cap pulled down over her curls. Moreover, Dick Thornton had to rush forward to meet her to keep her from tripping, since she was dragging his neglected overcoat with her and also trying to carry a thick mug of coffee.

Dick snatched at the mug none too politely.

“I say, you are a trump!” he remarked with such fervor, however, that any girl would have forgiven him.

Then Barbara sat down beside him on the stone ledge and after seeing that he had put on the overcoat, watched him drink the coffee. She even added two rolls for his refreshment from the depth of her pocket.

“I made the coffee for you myself. I think it rather good of me,” she remarked placidly. “The other girls are lying down. But I had a fancy to see the dawn over Paris myself and I thought if I brought you a present you would not send me away.”

Dick smiled, for the dawn had broken when Barbara came. From their tall roof they had a marvelous view of the city and the long line of beautiful bridges crossing the Seine. And there, not far away, looking as if she were built half upon the water and half upon land, the Church of Notre Dame.

A sudden glory of red and gold bathed its two perfect towers and the cross above. Slipping down between the grinning gargoyles along its sides it dipped into the river below. In another direction Montmartre was

shimmering like a rainbow, steeped in the colors and the glories of romance.

Barbara shivered over the strange beauty after the excitement of the night before. And although Dick was there and they were good friends, she wished that one of the girls had also been her companion. It was a time when she would have liked to put her hand inside a friend's just for the sense of warm human companionship.

But Dick was not at the moment looking or thinking of her. It was hardly to be wondered at, the girl thought with the old grace of a smile at herself. There were so many better things to see. Yet it gave her the chance for a farewell study of him. They were to part now in a short time, for how long neither of them knew.

The next instant Barbara regretted her decision. For how wretchedly Dick Thornton was looking! Could any one believe that only a little over a year had passed since their first meeting on the March night when she had arrived so unceremoniously at his father's house. Certainly Dick had been more than kind to her even then.

A moment later when Dick did chance to glance toward his companion she was crying hard but silently.

Once or twice before Dick had been surprised at Barbara Meade's unexpected tears, but now he understood them at once.

He offered her the comfort she had wished a little while before. Gently he took her hand inside his left one.

"I know you are thinking of me, Barbara, and this tiresome old arm of mine. It is tremendously kind of you," he protested. "But I want you to promise me not to worry and to keep Mill from fretting if you can. I hate you girls to go off to work again without me, but I've made up my mind to stay around Paris for a few months. I'm rather glad to have this chance to explain things to you. Of course, you know that when that shell shattered my shoulder it seemed to paralyze my arm. Well, I have not given up hope that something may yet be done for it. So as soon as I can get hold of one of the big surgeons here in Paris I want him to have a try at me. They are fairly busy these days with people who are of more account, but if I hang around long enough some one will find time to look after me. You know I have never

told, nor let Mildred tell mother and father just how serious things are with me. But if nothing can be done I've made up my mind to go home and find out what a one-armed man can do to be useful. He isn't much good over here at present. You see, Barbara, I have not yet forgotten your New York lectures on the duty and beauty of usefulness."

Dick said this in a laughing voice, with no intention of attempting the heroic, so Barbara did her best to answer in the same spirit.

Nevertheless, she had never gotten over her sense of responsibility and might always continue to feel it.

"Oh, I am sure something *can* be done," she answered, forcing herself to speak bravely. "But in any case you will come and say good-by to Mill and the rest of us before you sail, won't you?" she concluded.

Dick nodded, but by this time they had both gotten up and were walking across the roof top side by side.

"I say, Barbara," Dick added shyly just at the moment of parting, "however things turn out, promise me you won't take it too seriously. Somehow I can't say things as well as other fellows, but I'm not sorry I came over, in spite of this plagued arm of mine. I don't know why exactly, but this war business makes a man of one. Then when one thinks of what other fellows are having to give up—oh well, I read a poem by an Englishman who was killed the other day. Would you mind my reciting the last lines to you?"

Then taking the girl's consent for granted, Dick went on in a grave young voice that had much of the beauty which Barbara remembered in his song the year before.

"His name was Rupert Brooke and he wrote of the men who were going to die as he did:

"These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhop'd serene
That men call age; and those who would have been
Their sons, they gave—their immortality."

CHAPTER V

Other Fields

The work which the American girls were to do for the French *Croix de Rouge* (Red Cross) was to be accomplished under entirely different circumstances.

They traveled southeast nearly an entire day and toward evening were driven through a thickly wooded country to the edge of the Forest of Le Prêtre.

An American field hospital, an exact duplicate of those used in America, had recently been presented to the French Government by three Americans who desired that their identity be kept a secret. The hospital was made up of twenty tents; six of them large enough to take care of two hundred wounded men. And these hospital tents could be put up in fifteen minutes and taken down in six by the American ambulance volunteers, many of them students from Columbia, Harvard, Williams and other American universities.

So it was thought fitting that the four American Red Cross girls, who had lately offered their services to France, should assist in the nursing at these new hospitals. They had been located in southern France near the lines and just beyond the reach of the enemy's guns.

Therefore it was self-evident that different living arrangements would have to be made for the nurses. So Nona, Barbara, Mildred and even Eugenia were unfeignedly glad when they learned that they were to live together in a tiny French farmhouse within short walking distance of the field hospital. There they were to do their own housekeeping, with the assistance of an old man who would take charge of the outdoor work.

The farmhouse had been offered for their use by the French countess who was the owner of an ancient chateau about a mile away. Indeed, the farmhouse lay within the boundaries of her lands.

When the girls first tumbled out of the carriage they were too tired to be more than half-way curious over their new abode. But half an hour later they were investigating the entire place with delight.

This was because they had already rested and eaten a supper that would have served for all the good little princesses in the fairy stories.

Naturally the girls had expected to find their little house empty. But no sooner had they started up the cobblestone path to the blue front door when an old man appeared on the threshold, bowing with the grace of an eighteenth century courtier. He was only François, the old French peasant who was to be of what service he could to them.

There in the clean-scrubbed dining room stood a round oak table set with odd pieces of china, white and blue and gold, hundreds of years old and more valuable than any but a connoisseur could appreciate.

François himself waited to serve supper. The Countess, whose servant he had been for fifty years, had sent over the food—a pitcher of new milk, a square of golden honey, *petit fromage*, which is a delicious cream cheese that only the French can make, and a great bowl of wild strawberries, which ripen in autumn in southern France. Besides this there was a big loaf of snowy bread.

Barbara straightway threw her bonnet and coat aside. Then as she found the first place at the table she exclaimed, “So this is what one has to eat in France in war times!”

A few moments later Mildred took her place at what was hereafter to be known as the head of the table, with Eugenia just across and Barbara and Nona on either side. For so almost unconsciously the little family of four girls arranged themselves. Although it was not until later that Mildred Thornton was to prove the real authority in domestic matters, while Eugenia continued to regard herself as intellectual head of the family, with Nona and Barbara as talented but at times tiresome children.

However, after thanks and good-byes were said to old François, the girls started on their tour of the little house. Evidently it had belonged to real farmer people who must have worked some of the land of the countess. Doubtless the men had gone to war and the women found employment elsewhere.

The farmhouse was only one story and a half high, with the kitchen and dining room below, but above there were four small bedrooms with a single window each and sloping ceilings. But the charming thing was that the

walls were of rough plaster painted in beautiful colors—one rose, one blue, one yellow and the other lavender.

So the girls chose each the color she most loved—Barbara the blue, Nona the pink, Mildred the lavender, and Eugenia, professing not to care, the yellow.

It was just about dusk when they finally came outdoors again for a better view of the house itself. They had scarcely done more than glanced at it on entering.

The farmhouse was built of wood which had once been white but was now a light gray with the most wonderful turquoise blue door and shutters.

Indeed, the girls were to find out later that the little place was known in the neighborhood roundabout as “The House with the Blue Front Door.”

But though the house was so delightful that the girls had almost forgotten the sadness of their errand to the country, the landscape was far less cheerful.

A row of poplar trees, already half stripped of their leaves, formed a windbreak at one side of the house. Growing close on the farther side were a dozen pine trees, suggesting gloomy sentinels left to guard the deserted place.

There were no other houses in sight.

“I wonder where the chateau is?” Barbara asked a trifle wistfully. “I suppose if our services are not required at the hospital at once we might go in the morning to call on the Countess to thank her for her kindness.”

Immediately Eugenia frowned upon the suggestion. She was a little depressed by the neighborhood, now that evening was coming on, and she still found it difficult to agree often with Barbara.

“Of course we shall do no such thing,” she answered curtly. “Exchanging friendly visits with new and unknown neighbors may be a western custom, but so far as I have been told it is assuredly not the custom in France. Why, there are no such exclusive persons in the world as the old French nobility, of which this countess is a member. Can’t you just imagine what she would think of the forwardness of American girls if we should intrude upon her in such a fashion?”

“Oh,” Barbara replied in a rather crestfallen voice as Nona put her arm across her shoulder. Then they started into the house together. A little later, however, she regained a part of her spirit, which Eugenia and the coming of night had crushed.

“I wonder, Eugenia,” she inquired in the soft tones in which she was most dangerous, “how you have learned so much concerning the customs of the old French nobility. Was it because you were introduced to Captain Castaigne the other day? I believe Lieutenant Hume said that he really belonged to the aristocracy, but preferred not to use his title in Republican France.”

Eugenia flushed and was about to answer curtly when Mildred Thornton interposed good-naturedly:

“For goodness sakes, children, don’t quarrel on our first evening, or you may bring us bad luck! Remember, we have got to prove that girls can live and work together. But I don’t want to preach. Let’s go to bed so we can get up early in the morning and unpack and get used to things about the house. I have no doubt some one from the field hospital will come over to tell us what they wish us to do. I am afraid I don’t know much about housekeeping or cooking except for the sick, but I am certainly going to try and learn.”

So the girls went in and each one lighted a candle and retired to her own room.

When she was nearly asleep, however, Barbara was startled by a head being thrust inside her door. Then by her flickering light she discovered Eugenia’s face looking uncommonly handsome with two long braids of dark hair framing her clear-cut features.

“Sorry I was so cross, Barbara,” she whispered. “You know, child, sometimes I feel that I must have been born an old maid.”

CHAPTER VI

The Chateau

Next morning Mildred and Eugenia went over the field hospital with a French officer who had been sent to receive them.

Barbara and Nona, therefore, undertook the unpacking and arranging of their belongings and also the task of preparing lunch, which was to be a light one. Indeed, all the household arrangements must be of the simplest, so that the girls might have their strength and enthusiasm to give to the work of nursing.

But because they had gotten up soon after daylight, Nona and Barbara found that they had two hours of freedom which might be spent in investigating the neighborhood. So putting on ordinary clothes instead of their nursing uniforms, they set out for a walk.

“I suppose,” Barbara suggested, making an odd grimace, “that there is no special harm in our walking through the estate of the countess and possibly looking at the chateau if we chance to be in the vicinity. I don’t believe that we can do much strolling about here without encroaching on her place. From what François told us yesterday she owns most of the countryside.”

Nona laughed. “That is possibly an exaggeration. Still, I would like to see the old chateau immensely. In spite of Eugenia, I agree with you that we may be permitted to humbly gaze upon it without attempting to speak to any one. I wonder in which direction we ought to go to discover it?”

The girls had gone several yards now and Barbara stopped and wheeled about.

“There is a pine forest over there to the left that is so lovely it won’t matter if it brings us out at the end of nowhere. Only we ought to drop bits of paper behind us like Hop o’ My Thumb for fear of getting lost.”

“I have a fairly good bump of locality,” the other girl answered.

Then in spite of the fact that they were two feminine persons, neither of the girls spoke again until they had walked at least a mile. Having come

unexpectedly upon a shining pool of water, it was then impossible not to utter exclamations of delight.

Nona dropped down on her knees and stared into the depth of it. "Have you read 'Peleas and Melisande,' Barbara?" she asked. "It opens in the most exquisite fashion with Melisande gazing down into the depth of the pool and crying over something she has lost. One never knows exactly what it is, but I always thought the entire story meant a reaching after the light. I suppose that is what war is, though it is a cruel and horrible way of searching for it."

Barbara nodded, although she did not know exactly what her friend was talking about. There was a poetic streak in Nona Davis that no other one of the four girls possessed. During her lonely childhood she seemed to have read an odd assortment of books. Of course she had not the real information that Eugenia had, but what she knew was more fascinating, at least according to Barbara Meade's ideas.

"Well, I hope that war may never cross the border line into these forests," Nona added thoughtfully, "although I can imagine any one who knew them could play hide and seek with an enemy for a long time. There is a little hut over there that seems deserted; let's go and see it."

As Barbara had been standing she of course had a better view than her companion, but Nona obediently followed her.

The little hut was empty. It was merely a tumbledown shack of logs and stones. However, some one must have inhabited it at one time or another, because there were signs of a fire and a few old pots and pans, weather beaten and rusty, that had been left about. Moreover, there was a moth-eaten fur rug that may have formed a bed.

Yet it was lonely and uncomfortable looking, so the girls did not care to linger. Besides, if they were to see the old French chateau during the morning they must find a place where it was more likely to be.

Discovering a path that appeared to have been more used than any other, they followed it. In ten minutes after they came to the edge of the clearing and there about a quarter of a mile beyond was the outline of the chateau.

"I suppose it is intruding to go nearer," Barbara said plaintively, "but I can't get the least satisfaction from this bird's-eye view."

“No doubt of it,” Nona answered, “yet I propose that we take the risk. These are war times and very few servants are left about any of the old places, so we may escape without being seen. I feel it is our duty, as long as Eugenia is not along, to see all that we can before our work begins. Then we’ll have no chance.”

The chateau was in a measure a disappointment, because after all it looked more like an old-time fortress than a dwelling house, and besides was dreadfully dilapidated.

“But once one was accustomed to this idea, it really became more interesting,” Nona finally argued.

A part of the chateau must have been erected in the fourteenth or fifteenth century when feudal warfare was still carried on in France. The stone tower had loopholes for windows with iron bars across, so that the approach of an enemy could be discovered and he might be attacked with slight danger to the inmates of the castle. This tower was in a fairly good state of preservation, but the rest of the house, where the living apartments were situated, was almost a ruin. There were signs of poverty everywhere. The servants’ quarters were deserted, there were no stables, nothing to suggest the prosperity that should accompany so famous a possession as the old chateau represented.

Indeed, the two American girls were so engaged in discussing the situation that they were not aware of anyone approaching. Unexpectedly they found a woman past middle age moving slowly toward them. She was alone save that she was accompanied by an immense silver-gray dog, which to Nona’s gratification she held by a leash. For in spite of her bravery in other matters, Nona was ridiculously and unreasonably fearful of dogs.

“Gracious!” Barbara whispered, half amused and half terror-stricken. “That must be the mythical countess herself. Shades of Eugenia, what shall we say or do?”

But the older woman gave them little opportunity for a decision.

She was small and slender, dressed in black, with a lace shawl over her head coming down into a point upon her forehead. Underneath were masses of carefully arranged snow-white hair. The Countess’ face was almost as

white as her hair; there was nothing that gave it color save her lips and a pair of somber dark eyes. Her expression was sad and aloof.

She must have recognized the two girls as Americans and known for what purpose they had just come to the neighborhood. Nevertheless, she passed by them without speaking, save for a slight inclination of her head. In spite of her kindness the evening before, assuredly she had no desire for further acquaintance.

When she was out of hearing Barbara and Nona gazed at each other like two forward children.

Then Barbara took off the small silk cap she was so fond of wearing.

“I am taking it off to Eugenia, Nona,” she explained. “Thank fortune, I did not intrude my western personality upon the great lady. I can just imagine how she would have treated me if I had undertaken to thank her for her kindness and what she would have thought about American girls in general. Eugenia put it mildly. Well, as a greater person than I am once remarked, ‘it takes all kinds of people to make a world.’ And methinks before this war nursing experience is over we shall have met a good many varieties. But let us get back to the little blue and gray farmhouse as soon as possible. Goodness knows, I would rather live in it than in a tumble-down chateau! Besides, I wish to apologize to Eugenia.”

However, the girls had only started on their return journey when some one came hobbling along behind them.

It was François and he carried a basket on his arm.

Nona inquired a shorter way home and the old man explained that as he was on the way to their house, he would like to be permitted to accompany them. There was a road that was only half as long as the route they had taken.

Naturally the girls were glad enough for the old man’s escort, especially as he was full of reminiscences of the neighborhood which he loved dearly to impart.

In his basket was another offering from the countess. Old François explained that if she had passed them without seeming to notice their presence, it was not that she intended being unkind. She was lonely and

depressed. All her kinspeople were at the front as well as her only son, who was the last to bear the family name. Moreover, they had been poor before, but now that all their farm people had gone off to the war and there was no one left to work in the fields, where was a single franc to come from? Besides, were not the Germans so near the line that if the worst took place they would overrun the countryside and destroy the little that was left?

Finally the girls discovered that the old man and his mistress were actually the only two persons remaining in the old chateau. When François was compelled to be away the countess had only her great dog for protection.

The picture was a pathetic one and Nona and Barbara felt less aggrieved by the older woman's coldness. One could hardly wonder that she did not care to meet or talk to strangers.

"But aren't you afraid to be here on this great place alone, François?" Nona asked, more to persuade the old man to go on talking than because she was interested in her question.

The old peasant shook his head enigmatically. But he was a garrulous old fellow and immensely pleased with Nona's ability to speak French.

"We will be in no danger," he said, bobbing his head and then shrugging his old shoulders until all his bent-over body seemed to be moving at once, "even if the barbarians should devastate our land. If this should happen the American girls must flee to old François for protection. They could say what they liked about the Red Cross insuring them from danger, he knew a better way." But what the way was François would not tell, although both girls teased and implored him to confide in them all the way back to the "House with the Blue Front Door."

CHAPTER VII

Nicolete

For the following week the four girls were too busy to think of anything save their hospital work and their household responsibilities.

But one afternoon about four o'clock one of their officer friends suggested that they pay a visit to the French line of trenches in their immediate neighborhood. Not the firing line, but the second line trenches where the reserve soldiers slept, ate, smoked their cigarettes and even edited a daily paper.

For some little time there had been a lull in the fighting, so there could be little danger in such a tour of inspection. Yet if there had been, the Red Cross girls would have given it scant thought. They were becoming so accustomed to the conditions of war that even Barbara Meade confessed herself a little less of a coward. Indeed, they were beginning to understand why many soldiers take their daily existence so calmly and cheerfully, until actually they are bored, or homesick, or both, unless fighting is going on or the prospects of it near.

Trenches, you probably know, are not arranged in parallel lines, the one exactly behind the other like long pieces of ribbon. They often form a series of intricate underground passages, some of them crossing and recrossing each other, so that in one battle front in France where there were one hundred and forty miles of trenches there were only twelve miles directly facing the enemy.

Naturally the Red Cross girls could only see a very small section of trench life during one afternoon's visit.

"But the briefness of the excursion was the chief thing to recommend it," Barbara Meade insisted afterwards, although interested at the time.

Following their soldier guide, the girls walked through a deep, wide tunnel with a wooden paving at the bottom, such as one used to see in old-time village streets.

Inside the light was dim and gray, broken by shafts of sunlight filtering down through flimsy roofs of straw and branches of trees, placed above the openings to conceal the French trenches from the German air scouts.

Eugenia and Nona kept together at first with Barbara and Mildred close behind them. Every few feet of the way, however, one or all four of them would stop for conversation with the French soldiers.

Among the men there were several who had made pathetic efforts to turn their mole-like quarters into semblances of homes. One young fellow had actually swung a faded photograph of his mother upon a wooden peg which he had hammered into the earth. So “Ma Mère” had become the mascot of his trench. Because of her presence, the other soldier declared, not one German shell had fallen into their ditch.

Moreover, many good Catholics had iron or wooden crosses suspended above the small heap of possessions each soldier was allowed to keep in his trench. These were his knapsack and rifle, sometimes a few papers and magazines, perhaps a writing pad and pencil and a small roll of first-aid appliances presented by the French Red Cross Society.

Of necessity a soldier’s existence inside a trench must be a quiet one. Many of them are compelled to turn night into day, so they sleep while the light shines and stay on guard at night when there is always greater danger of attack. However, as it was late afternoon when the Red Cross girls made their tour of inspection, it was about the time the soldiers enjoyed their recreation. Only the sentries appeared to be doing active duty. Many of the other men were smoking or joking with one another, some of them were even drinking afternoon tea after the fashion they had acquired from the English Tommies.

As the four American girls, preceded by their guide, approached, walking along through the center of the trench as if they were on a city street, first the soldiers stared at them with surprise and then with pleasure. It was an odd sight to see a petticoat in such a place!

Naturally the soldiers wished to shake hands with their guests, to ask questions about their wounded comrades, and in many cases to tell them how they had conquered the difficulties in their underground existence.

Yet how differently the four girls were affected by the experience! Barbara Meade felt extraordinarily depressed. Even if the soldiers did make the best of things, she could not help thinking that many of them were just young boys who ought to have been whistling and working in the sunshine, or else studying or playing upon college grounds.

Mildred also found it difficult to behave as cheerfully as she would have liked. However, Nona and Eugenia were really too entertained by what they saw and heard to reflect upon anything save the wonder of the scene about them.

The American girls were at present nursing in that portion of France where the trench system has been known to the outside world as "The Labyrinth," so intricate and maze-line are its passageways.

But it was almost at the end of their journey when Barbara Meade made a discovery that in some odd fashion made a stronger appeal to her than any of the wonders they had seen. Their trip had of course been made through one of the rear trenches at some distance from the German line. Now they had come to the last ditch they were to be allowed to enter. It was less deep than the others and sloped gradually to the earth above. Moreover, the light now shone more distinctly, so that just at first the girls were a little blinded after the darkness. It was always perpetual twilight in the deeper trenches until night fell.

Barbara stood for a moment with her eyelids fluttering and a curiously intense expression on her face. Then she reached out her hand and touched Mildred Thornton, who chanced at the instant to be nearest her.

"I can't understand," she whispered. Then without finishing her sentence she wrinkled up her small nose in an absurd fashion, sniffing the heavy underground air.

"I suppose our trip has gone to my head," she murmured, "but do you know I thought I just smelt a delicious odor of flowers. Do you suppose it is because the air here is different?"

Eugenia also sniffed. "Flowers!" she repeated indignantly, overhearing the remark. "Really, Barbara, I don't see how you can manage to be foolish so many times." Nevertheless, she slipped her arm inside the younger girl's, noticing that she looked pale and tired.

At this time the officer who had been acting as their escort moved on ahead with Nona and Mildred following him.

A second later and Eugenia also stopped, arching her thin nostrils.

For there standing just in front of Barbara was an unexpected figure. He was a boy of about nineteen. But instead of having the dark hair and eyes of most young Frenchmen, he was blond, with pale gold hair, blue eyes and the faintest down of a future moustache. Moreover, he held a bunch of old-fashioned flowers in his hand, which he was thrusting toward the two strange young women.

“There, I did know what I was talking about, after all!” Barbara ejaculated faintly to her companion. However, Eugenia had a habit of paying no attention to one when she chanced to be in the wrong.

“Thank you,” she remarked graciously to the young soldier as she accepted his flowers, for Eugenia could be gracious when she chose. “But do tell how you managed to find a bouquet at such a time and place?”

She was speaking her best school French, but in spite of her peculiar accent the soldier somehow managed to understand.

“Out of my *own* garden,” he replied, with a faint lifting of the blond mustache.

The young soldier looked like a grown-up baby, Barbara thought, with his fair curly hair, his pink cheeks and his china-blue eyes.

“You see there are long hours here in the trenches when we men have so little to do, one suffers the *grand ennui*,” he explained to Eugenia. “So my friends and I have made a garden. If you have a minute more to spare will you come and see?”

Obediently the two girls followed until the soldier led them to the opening in the trench that led up to the outside world. Already Nona and Mildred and the young officer had disappeared.

But there like a sunken garden about four feet below the earth were two beds of bright old-fashioned flowers and small stunted evergreens. The gardeners had left a pathway of earth in the center of the trench, just as one might in any ordinary garden.

Barbara rubbed her eyes. She was pretending to be overcome with surprise, but in reality felt the tears coming. For some reason she could not explain it struck her as terribly pathetic that the soldiers, hiding in these trenches for such tragic work, should spend their spare hours making the dark world beautiful.

Eugenia was bent upon understanding the situation.

“Did you actually plant seeds here in such a place and under such conditions and make them grow?” she demanded. “Whatever made you think they would blossom?”

The French soldier smiled. He seemed rather to enjoy the questioning, since it showed the proper interest and admiration for his work.

“I brought back the first plant from our garden when I had been at home on sick leave,” he explained proudly. “Then without thinking or expecting the flower to live, I thrust my plant into the earth where there was a little sunlight. Then the *pauvre petite* grew and flourished and so I wrote home for others. Later my comrades grew interested. They brought water for my plants and saved their tobacco ashes to put around them. Then they too asked that more plants be sent them. Some we found by the wayside in our walks through the woods. We have been lucky because no German shell has dared destroy our garden.”

The young fellow looked so pleased that even Eugenia, who was far less sentimental than Barbara, felt touched. It might be ridiculous to spend one’s time tending a garden when there was so much more important work to be done, but then the French are an artistic and a sentimental people. One had read of the soldiers in the trenches planting gardens in their spare hours without really believing it until now.

But Eugenia was impatient to be gone. The other three girls expected to return home immediately, but she wished first to pay a short visit to the field hospital back of the trenches to inquire about one of her patients.

However, when once they were safe upon the face of the earth again, both girls uttered exclamations of surprise. But neither of them showed the least desire to move away. For there just ahead of them was a stretch of level green country with about fifty soldiers forming a circle within it. They were

not lounging or talking, but were alert and interested. They were watching something or someone who must be in the center of the circle.

Barbara and Eugenia discovered that Nona and Mildred had joined the group. They were equally absorbed. Indeed, when the two girls joined them, Barbara had to stand on tiptoe to find out what was going on. Neither of her friends paid the slightest attention to her. Indeed, it was only through the kindness of a soldier who moved aside to make room for her and Eugenia that they were able to see what was taking place.

There in the middle of the green space was such an entrancing figure that Barbara fairly gasped with surprise and pleasure. Eugenia frowned with a mixture of disapproval and interest.

A girl of about fifteen or sixteen was dancing for the entertainment of the soldiers. She was slender, with straight black hair, loose to her shoulders. On her head was a scarlet cap and she wore a thin blouse and a short skirt the color of her cap. As she whirled about in her dance now and then she would snatch the cap from her head. Then the girls could see that she seemed to bend and sway almost without effort. Her eyes were large and dark and her lips a bright red, yet in spite of the exercise of the dance her cheeks remained pale.

“She is like a poppy dancing in the wind, isn’t she, Eugenia?” Barbara whispered admiringly.

Eugenia looked severe. “I must say I cannot approve of such an exhibition,” she commented.

For once Barbara agreed. “I don’t *approve* either, but the girl is entrancing. I wonder who she is and what her name can be? The soldiers behave as if she had danced for them before.”

At this moment Barbara heard a voice at her elbow and turning discovered the young Frenchman who had presented them the bunch of flowers.

His pink cheeks were pinker than ever and his eyes bluer. Once again Barbara decided that he was a glorified, grown-up baby. He held a little spray of mignonette in his hand which he tossed toward the little dancer.

“She is Nicolette,” he whispered excitedly. “At least that is what I have chosen to call her. No one knows who she is or where she comes from, only

that she dances for us here nearly every afternoon at this hour.”

CHAPTER VIII

Who Goes There?

Eugenia stayed later at the hospital than she expected. The patient she had left a few hours before was not so well and wished her to be with him. So she sat holding the boy's hand and talking to him gently until he had fallen asleep. It was curious that Eugenia, who was always so stern with well persons, was wonderfully sympathetic with her patients. She was firm, of course, but only when she felt it necessary for their good. For Eugenia was not a "butterfly" nurse, the name that has been applied to the fashionable society women who have been caring for the wounded as much for their own entertainment as the soldiers' good.

So somehow, in spite of her American French, the boy she had been tending preferred her to remain by him rather than his own countrywoman.

She was very tired when she slipped away. She had come to the field hospital at eight o'clock in the morning, worked until four, then spent two hours in the trenches and afterwards another two hours at nursing again. For it was after eight o'clock when she started for home.

Naturally no one appreciated that Eugenia was returning alone. Of course, in war times the Red Cross nurses had grown accustomed to caring for themselves as well as other persons. Nevertheless, this evening the circumstances were unusual. Eugenia was a stranger in a strange land. She had only recently come to this portion of France, was unfamiliar with the country, which was filled with regiments of soldiers. Moreover, the night was uncomfortably dark. Had the doctors or attendants at the field hospital known of her departure, one of them would have insisted upon accompanying her.

However, no one is sensible when tired. So for some reason, although a little nervous at the prospect ahead of her, Eugenia got away without being seen. She was determined to give no trouble. Of course, if she had been Barbara, or Nona, or Mildred she would have considered it fool-hardy, almost wicked, to have attempted walking a mile in the darkness alone. But

with Eugenia Peabody the case was different. No one had ever thought of looking after her in her life, and surely no one would begin now.

The first part of her trip home was along a path through the open fields. As Eugenia hurried on toward their little adopted home she began wondering if the girls had missed her at supper time. This was the pleasantest hour in all their day. Then possibly because she was weary she decided that they had probably been glad to be relieved of her presence. For no one of the American Red Cross girls really cared much for her. Of this Eugenia was convinced. Nona and Mildred both tried to be kind and Barbara behaved as well as she could, except on occasions when she felt especially antagonistic.

Once or twice Eugenia stumbled, not because there were difficulties in her way but because she was thinking so deeply. What could be the trouble with her nature? As she was in a mood of severe truthfulness with herself she realized that no one had ever loved her a great deal in her entire life.

Left an orphan when she was a few years old, she could not recall her mother or father. Of course, her Aunt Rebecca, who had brought her up, had been reasonably fond of her. But Eugenia was convinced that she had never been an attractive child.

Yet why, tonight of all nights, should she fall to thinking of herself? And why in this darkness and in a foreign land should she have such a clear vision of the little girl in the old New England town?

One thing she recalled most distinctly: she must have always looked old. Strangers used to discuss her and people used always to expect more from her than from the other children of the same age. Moreover, she had always been painfully shy and this shyness had colored her whole life.

As a child she simply had to pretend to feel superior and to be serious-minded, because she did not know how to play and laugh like the others did. Since she had been grown up, and for the same reason, she had gone on behaving in the same way.

Often here in Europe with the other Red Cross girls she had wished to be as gay and nonsensical as they were. Yet she never knew how to relax into a frivolous mood.

Once the tears actually started into Eugenia's dark eyes. She realized that now and then she had even been jealous of her three companions. Nona and

Barbara were so pretty and charming and Mildred had qualities finer than these two possessions. Besides, the three girls made her feel so dreadfully old. This is never an agreeable sensation after twenty, however much the teens may aspire to appear elderly. Then Eugenia managed to smile at herself, although it was a kind of twisted smile. It occurred to her to wonder if she had failed to like Barbara Meade because it was Barbara who had first suggested that she must be a great deal older than the rest of them.

Deliberately Eugenia now began to walk slowly. She did not wish to arrive at home in her present mood. Having passed through the fields, she was now on her way through the lane that led through an open woods directly to the "House with the Blue Front Door." Dozens of times Eugenia had made this trip in the daytime, but a country road has a very different appearance at night. Moreover, the trees made the lane seem far darker than the path through the open fields.

It was stupid not to have brought her electric flashlight! However, nothing had so far disturbed Eugenia's progress. Not one wayfarer or soldier out upon leave had she encountered, although the neighborhood was thickly populated with men and women living on the outskirts of the entrenchments.

Eugenia hoped that if she should meet a passerby he might be a soldier. There were but few of them who would not respect her uniform. However, she was beginning to forget her previous nervousness, for this lane was not a frequently traveled one. It merely led past their little house into the heavier woods beyond, where Barbara and Nona had told of their discovery of the deserted hut and the pool of Melisande.

There was no moon and Eugenia was making little noise. She had a fashion of being able to get about almost soundlessly, a characteristic she had cultivated in the sick room until she could move almost as quietly as an Indian.

Then suddenly she began to feel more sensible and cheerful. Home was no longer far away and even if no one loved her very devotedly, at least the girls would have saved supper for her. Food would go a long way toward dispelling her blues.

Unconsciously Eugenia was moving more rapidly. She had almost broken into a run before she became aware of footsteps behind her. Then, although pausing for about half a second to find out, she could not decide whether one or half a dozen persons were following her.

It was most unreasonable of Eugenia. She had no cause for thinking that the presence of other persons traveling the same lane meant they were in pursuit of her. But have you ever given way to an attack of melancholy? Then you know that invariably it leaves your nerves unstrung and ready for a collapse.

Certainly Eugenia did not consider herself beautiful or attractive, yet even in the midst of her self-depreciation she had not thought to bewail her own lack of judgment. Nevertheless, almost at once after hearing the steps she started to run. This was, of course, the most ridiculous thing she could have done. A moment's thought and she must have appreciated the fact. These were war times and the suggestion that one wished to escape a pursuer was in itself a sign of guilt.

Immediately Eugenia increased her speed, at the same instant the persons or things behind her gave chase. The next moment a voice rang out. Something it said in French which held a tone of authority. However, Eugenia paid it not the slightest attention. Only a quarter of a mile beyond lay "The House with the Blue Front Door," so her one idea now was to reach it.

"Barbara! Barbara!" Eugenia called faintly, though just why she should have endeavored to summon the smallest and apparently the most timid of the Red Cross girls, far be it from Eugenia to understand either then or afterwards. Fright sometimes makes one do extraordinary things.

But imagine the stately Eugenia running through the night with her nurse's coat forming a kind of sail behind her, her bonnet in her hand and her heavy hair unbound and falling down her neck, crying out to Barbara for protection.

But Barbara herself could not have run faster, for now Eugenia had real cause for fear. A great something was pounding nearer and nearer her. The sound it made was scarcely human. Then again a voice shouted a few words sharply in French. In her terror Eugenia could not comprehend their

meaning. Nevertheless, she must have hesitated for an instant, for immediately after something struck her on either shoulder. Falling, she was thus unable to see what had happened, but remained mute with the horror. The tremendous thing still hovered over her so that she dared not speak or move.

Naturally an eternity seemed to have passed over Eugenia. However, it was only another moment before a light flashed in her face.

“Sacre cœur!” she heard a voice exclaim. “Une femme!”

Then the great creature that had pinned her down moved away and Eugenia felt a hand upon her arm.

“I beg a thousand pardons,” a voice said in English. “You will never be able to forgive me. But why did you not halt when I called out to you? I am a French officer and feared you were a runaway soldier or a thief. They come now and then to our camp. But that I should allow you to be struck down by my dog! Monsieur le Duc, I am most bitterly ashamed of you. You at least should have known better.”

This last remark was addressed to the dog, in order to gain time and to help cover the young French officer’s chagrin and confusion. With his light he had of course discovered that Eugenia was wearing a nurse’s uniform, which made his act the more unpardonable. Nevertheless, as he apologized he was struggling to help her to arise.

By this time Eugenia was more or less herself again and moreover was exceedingly angry. She was frightened and hurt by her experience, but more, her dignity was upset as it had never been before.

Eugenia disdained the French officer’s assistance. Quickly as possible she got up on her feet, though still unable to speak because of a queer contraction in her throat and odd shaking of her knees. One glance she deigned to give at the great beast that had so frightened her. She could only see the outline of an immense dog, that appeared as apologetic as the man since his master’s rebuke. But Eugenia would not look at the young officer. However, it would have done little good, for she could not have seen him with any distinctness in the darkness.

Yet Eugenia would have been both amazed and annoyed if she had dreamed of how clearly the offender could see her. He had managed to turn his

flashlight upon her in such a way that he had a perfect vision of her without being seen.

Curiously Eugenia was looking unusually handsome. Her cheeks were brilliantly flushed and her dark eyes glowing with a mixture of emotions. Moreover, she had beautiful hair when it was unbound, although few people realized it after she had twisted it into a tight rope to adorn her head.

“I presume your mistake was unintentional,” she remarked in an icy voice, “but please in future be more careful of the victims of your mistakes.”

Surely Eugenia had forgotten that she was speaking to an officer in the French army, for her tone was that of a severe elder addressing an erring child. She did not at present know the officer’s rank, age nor condition of life. But one is by no means sure that any possible consideration would have influenced Eugenia in her present mood.

“No, I prefer to find my way home alone,” she continued in answer to her companion’s humble request to accompany her.

So Eugenia walked on with her head very high for the rest of the journey, pretending not to know that the officer and his dog were keeping at a respectful distance in order to afford her a safe escort.

This was scarcely necessary “after the pot was in the fire,” Eugenia thought, recalling an old New England expression. She was no longer frightened now that she could see the light in their own little French farmhouse.

Yet to the surprise and consternation of the three American Red Cross girls, Eugenia burst into tears the moment Barbara had opened the blue front door.

CHAPTER IX

A Conversation

Eugenia sat in an old oak chair in the farmhouse dining room while Barbara swept and dusted.

It was the morning after her experience in the woods and actually she had confessed to a headache and had decided not to go to the field hospital for her daily nursing.

At present the four American girls were on day duty and remained at the hospital from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, their places being taken by other nurses at that hour. But each girl had one day of rest and by chance this happened to be Barbara's.

Eugenia had been asleep when Nona and Mildred went away to work and only in the last half hour had crept downstairs. All her life every now and then she had been subject to wretched headaches which left her speechless and exhausted. But so far since coming abroad her three girl companions had not been aware of them.

Now every now and then while Barbara worked she glanced toward Eugenia. It was difficult to recognize the severe and energetic Miss Peabody in this white-faced, quiet girl. For Eugenia had never since the beginning of their acquaintance looked so young. For one thing, she was wearing a beautiful violet cashmere kimono Mildred had presented her during their stay in Paris. She had never worn it until now. At least the gift had not come directly from Mildred or Eugenia would never have accepted it. But Mrs. Thornton had written from New York asking that Mildred's new friends receive some little gifts from her, and Mildred had chosen four kimonos. They were too pretty for nursing use, so the other girls had been enjoying theirs in the evenings alone at home.

Eugenia had never consented to relax even to that extent when work was over and there was no possibility of company. Now, however, her costume was not of her own choosing, for after Barbara had taken a cup of coffee to her room and persuaded her into drinking it, she had dressed her in the new

kimono without asking permission. Also she had brushed and plaited Eugenia's heavy hair into two long braids.

"Funny for a New England old maid to be able to look like an Italian Madonna simply because her hair is down and her head aches," Barbara thought to herself after one of her quick glances at Eugenia.

She made rather a fetching picture herself, but Barbara was at present entirely unconscious. Simply because it happened to be the most useful costume she owned for the purpose, she was clad in a French peasant's smock of dark-blue linen, and wore a little white cap at a rakish angle on top of her brown curls. Her hair was now sufficiently long to twist into a small knot at the nape of her neck, where delicate tendrils were apt to creep forth like the new growth on a vine.

Finally Eugenia, opening her eyes and catching sight of Barbara, at this moment on tip toes in her effort to dust the tall mantel-shelf, said unexpectedly:

"You are very pretty, Barbara dear, and just the kind of a little woman that men are apt to care for. I wonder if you ever think of marrying, or do you mean to go on nursing all your life? Now and then I have thought that Dick _____"

But her sentence was interrupted by Barbara's dropping the candlestick which she was dusting and then turning to stare at her companion.

"Why, Eugenia, I thought you were asleep," she began reproachfully. Then showing the dimple which she so resented, she added slyly, "But what on earth made you speak on such a subject? I never dreamed that you ever had a thought of such a thing in your life."

Barbara bit her lips. No wonder Eugenia considered her a goose, for certainly she seemed possessed of the fatal gift of saying the wrong thing.

Eugenia was no longer pale. Indeed, a wave of hot color had turned her entire face crimson.

"Am I so unattractive as all that?" she asked slowly, forgetting her headache for the instant and feeling a return of the mood that had troubled her the evening before, until the excitement of her adventure had driven it from her mind.

“Do you know, Barbara, I was trying to decide just last night what was the matter with me. Now I know you don’t like me, but I think you are fair. Tell me why you suppose I have never even thought of love and marriage and the kind of happiness other girls expect. I’m not so very old, after all! But you are right in one idea. I never, never have dreamed of it for myself. For one thing, no one has ever been in love with me even the least little bit in all my life!”

In spite of the tactlessness of Barbara’s speech actually Eugenia was speaking without the least temper, when ordinarily she was given to showing anger with her companion under the slightest provocation.

In consequence Barbara felt entirely disgusted with herself, and what was worse—ridiculously tongue-tied.

“Oh, I did not mean anything like that,” she stammered. “That is—at least—why, of course you are as nice as anyone when you let yourself be, Eugenia. But you do seem cold, as if you considered other people not exactly worth your attention. And—and——”

Not feeling that she was making out a very good case for herself, Barbara put her duster down and came and sat on a wooden stool near the older girl.

“I am an idiot, Eugenia,” she insisted scornfully. “No wonder Dick Thornton always declares I have never grown up. Besides, I don’t believe you have never had any one in love with you, not even a young girl-and-boy affair. No girl ever lives to be as old as you are without——”

Again Barbara stopped short, biting her lips.

But Eugenia only shook her head and laughed. “I am the exception that proves the rule. Besides, my dear, you came from the west and not New England, and you weren’t, as people have so often said of me, ‘born an old maid.’ But never mind, I won’t ask any more embarrassing questions.”

Eugenia tried to speak lightly, half amused and half hurt by the expression of chagrin on Barbara Meade’s face.

“By the way,” she added, in an effort to change the subject, “how is Dick Thornton? I have been meaning to ask you what you have heard from him.”

This time the younger girl flushed, but so slightly that Eugenia did not appear to notice it.

“I have heard nothing at all,” she returned honestly. “But I don’t suppose Dick is better, as Mildred and Nona have both had letters and say there was nothing important in them.”

Suddenly Barbara took Eugenia’s hand.

“You have more experience than the rest of us,” she began with unusual humility. “I wonder if you think Dick has a chance of ever using his arm again?”

The other girl hesitated. Certainly she had no right to believe that Barbara felt more than the natural interest in Dick that they all had for Mildred’s brother and their own friend. And, as Barbara had just suggested, Eugenia was not supposed even to think on romantic subjects. Nevertheless, her voice was unusually gentle as she replied:

“I don’t really know one thing in the world about it, Barbara, but Dick is young and has lots of determination and most certainly I have not given up hope.”

Eugenia had another twinge of pain in her temples at this second and so closed her eyes. Although hearing a knock at their back door, she did not open them even when Barbara left the room.

A moment later, hearing a strange sound, she was surprised by a sudden sense of terror, almost of suffocation. Yet surely she must be in a kind of nightmare brought on by her illness, since the sound suggested the footsteps which had pursued her the night before and brought on the same unreasoning fear.

Clutching the sides of her chair, Eugenia stared ahead of her.

There in the doorway, leading from the kitchen into the principal room of the farmhouse, stood an immense dog. It was odd the manner in which he surveyed Eugenia. There was suspicion, distrust and withal an air of apology in his manner.

The dog was a magnificent creature, a great Dane, silver-gray in color with a heavy silver collar about its throat, engraved with what appeared to be a coat of arms.

Ordinarily Eugenia had a strong affection for animals, so it was absurd of her to be so nervous because of her experience the evening before.

Nevertheless, she felt again that she could neither speak nor move.

Yet at this moment Barbara danced in, pushing aside the big dog as fearlessly and unceremoniously as if he had been a Persian kitten. She held a number of letters in her hands and a big bunch of autumn leaves. Behind her, with the eternal basket on his arm, hobbled old François, the French servant from the home of the owner of their farmhouse.

He looked like a little old brown gnome with his crooked legs, his stooping shoulders and brown peaked cap almost the color of his skin.

“François is better than a fairy godmother—he is a fairy godfather!” Barbara exclaimed delightedly. “He has brought us letters and good news of all kinds this morning. You are sure to feel better when you hear, Eugenia. But how did you happen to bring Duke over with you, François? I thought he was supposed to stay at home and take care of his mistress when you were compelled to leave her alone.”

Eugenia listened with only mild attention. Evidently this dog belonged to the countess upon whose estate they were living. He could scarcely be the creature that had behaved so unceremoniously with her the night before.

But François’ little black eyes were twinkling. “Monsieur le Duc is able to be with me because Madame is *not* alone today,” he explained proudly.

Eugenia frowned. “What a pompous, ridiculous name to bestow upon a dog, no matter how splendid he happened to be! But wasn’t there something familiar in his title? Surely it was the same name that the young French officer had used to his dog the night before!”

CHAPTER X

Chateau d'Amélie

“My dear Eugenia, you might as well confess that you are desperately interested. If you say anything else we won't believe you,” Barbara declared positively.

Three days afterward, between four and five in the afternoon, the four American Red Cross girls were leaving the little French farmhouse together, and evidently with some definite intention. Nevertheless, the journey could have nothing to do with their nursing, since the faces and the costumes of three of the girls suggested a gala occasion. Eugenia, however, having entirely recovered her health and poise, had returned to her former manner and character. Yet she too was wearing her best dress, recently purchased in Paris, and was looking sternly handsome.

“Then I might as well not answer you at all, Barbara, since you have made up your mind already what I should reply,” she answered curtly. Without intending to be ungracious she stalked off in front of the little procession.

The other two girls laughed, but Barbara, making a little grimace, ran on until she was able to catch up with Eugenia. She was beginning to think now and then that the older girl's manner was more severe than her emotions. Now she gave her arm a little shake.

“Don't be so superior, Miss Peabody from Boston! You must make your confession along with the rest of us. So tell me the honest truth—‘hope I may-die-if-I-don't’ kind—aren't you terribly pleased that the Countess, whose guests we have been for some time, has condescended to be willing to meet us and has asked us to have coffee with her this afternoon at her chateau?”

Still Eugenia demurred. “Oh, I presume it will be a novel experience. Nevertheless, I don't think we show proper pride in accepting an invitation before the Countess has called upon us. It isn't the way we do such things at home. If it comes to a question of family, of course I am an American, but the Peabodys of Boston——”

Barbara's laughter rang out deliciously. She was in the gayest possible humor and suggested a little woodland creature in her brown cloth suit and hat with a single scarlet wing. What had become of the serious-minded young American woman devoting her life to the care of the wounded?

"But it isn't a question of family, Eugenia, or how should I dare live and breathe in the same world with you, any more than with a French countess?" she protested. "But please remember that we have accepted a great deal more from this same Countess than a simple invitation to spend an hour with her. We are living in *her* house, we have been eating a goodly portion of her food. Oh, I know this is because we are in France to nurse the soldiers she adores! Still, I can't see that this cancels our obligations. Besides, she is a much older woman and——"

Eugenia put her one disengaged hand up to her ear.

"I surrender, Barbara, in all meekness! But really, it is not necessary to produce so many arguments for doing a thing you are simply crazy to do. You merely wish to gratify your curiosity. You know, I don't believe that we should be engaging in frivolous pursuits like paying visits upon strangers, when we are here in Europe for such serious purposes. Still, I don't suppose that an occasional break really interferes with our work."

"Certainly not," Barbara finished with emphasis. Then she skipped along beside her taller companion like a small girl endeavoring to keep up with a large one. "Besides, Eugenia, think of how wonderful the news is! The Germans are actually retiring of their own accord! There hasn't been any fighting in our neighborhood for over a week now. No wonder the Countess Amélie feels like having guests at last. François says that she has not been so cheerful since the war began. I don't know how you feel, Eugenia, but Mildred and Nona and I think it a wonderful experience to see the inside of an old French home which was in existence long before the French Revolutionary days. It seems that this Countess has never even gone to Paris, nor visited anyone except her old family friends who are also members of the nobility. She won't even acknowledge that France is today a great Republic. She still tries to live like the *grande dames* of the days before the Revolution."

Eugenia fairly sniffed. Also she held her shoulders straighter and her head higher.

“Then she must be a very absurd old woman and I am more than ever sure that I shall not like her. The idea of not realizing that a republic is the only just form of government in the world! I wouldn’t be anything except an American——”

Once more Barbara smiled, patting the older girl’s arm soothingly.

“Of course you wouldn’t, my dear, and neither would any of the rest of us, except perhaps Nona. She is really an old-time aristocrat, although she would rather perish than think so. But just the same I don’t see why one should not be interested in contrasts in this life! What could be greater than the gulf between this old French aristocrat and us?”

“What indeed?” answered Eugenia, more wisely than she then knew.

For at this moment the interest which the four girls had been feeling in their new hostess temporarily died away.

According to Nona’s and Barbara’s suggestion, and in spite of the distance, they were approaching the chateau through the woods, which the two girls had visited the day after their arrival in this portion of southern France.

November had come, but the autumn was so far deliciously warm. Difficult it was to imagine a world at war on this afternoon and in this particular forest! For, by some freak of fortune, this woodland had so far escaped the ravages of the German shells. Over it and around it they had ploughed their devastating way. But until now the birds prepared their winter nests here undisturbed in the tall trees, and the pool of Melisande remained unbroken save by its own ripples.

Again the girls walked more quietly along the path under the trees than in the open country. They were thinking perhaps of different things, while their eyes were absorbed in the loveliness about them. For after months of nursing, sometimes amid horrors and suffering one could not afterwards discuss, it was healing to both soul and body to inhale the sweetness of the earth and air.

Southern France was unlike the land lying to the north and close to the Belgian frontier, where the Red Cross girls had for some months past been nursing the British soldiers. That was an orchard and a vineyard country, this a land of forest and of golden grain fields. Many of the trees were pine

and cedar, yet there were occasional maples and elms, and here and there a chestnut.

A small branch of scarlet and yellow leaves dropped near Eugenia's feet. It was a far call to her New England home, yet somehow the color and the atmosphere of the woods awakened home memories. Unconsciously Eugenia stopped and thrust the bunch of leaves inside her belt. Against the blue of her costume they shone like flame, making her eyes and hair show darker by contrast and bringing a brighter tone to her clear but pale skin.

Noticing the attractive effect of the careless decoration, the three other girls were far too wise to mention the fact to Eugenia, or assuredly the leaves would again have been trampled under foot.

However, they had other interests more engrossing to absorb them.

Barbara and Nona led a short detour for a sight of the old hut that had interested them on their previous walk. But Mildred and Eugenia were both a little scornful of the story that this was a hermit's hut, uninhabited for a number of years. This afternoon it was so self-evident that some one was now living in it that Eugenia hurried the others away. No one could be seen at the moment, but there was a pile of fresh ashes in front of the house, a stack of freshly gathered wood and chips by the tumbled-down door, and a scarlet cap caught in the top of a tall bush.

Moreover, because it was growing late and their invitation was for five o'clock, Eugenia could not be persuaded to linger by the tiny lake which Nona had christened by the poetic title of the "Pool of Melisande." The pool one might visit on another afternoon, but perhaps there might never come a like opportunity from the Countess.

Indeed, as the four girls finally approached the ancient stone house never would they have confessed to one another how nervous they were feeling over the next hour. Nona Davis was perhaps least self-conscious. Life in the southern part of the United States among a few conservative old families is not unlike that of the almost forgotten nobility of old France.

The path to the Chateau d'Amélie, whose title came down from the first countess of the name, was as overgrown with weeds as any deserted farmhouse. Yet who would look down at their feet when trees more than a hundred years old stood guard along the avenue leading to the ancient

portico? And in crossing a rickety bridge could one think of the loose planks, knowing that the muddy water that flowed under it was once the moat that surrounded the feudal palace?

Nevertheless, Barbara had to stifle a laugh when at length François opened the iron-bound wooden door admitting them to the chateau. For instead of his peasant's blouse and peaked cap, this afternoon François wore a livery which must have been handed down to him by a majordomo at least twice his size. His small, bent-over form was almost lost in the large trousers, while the tails of the long coat with its tarnished gold lace hung down past his knees.

Moreover, François' manner was equally changed. Gone was the friendly light in his little dark eyes, the protecting, almost patronizing manner which he had grown accustomed to using in his devoted service to the American Red Cross girls. This old Frenchman had his nation's gift of feeling the part he was called upon by fate to play. Today old François felt himself a servant of the days of the great Louis XIV. Apparently he had never seen his lady's guests before.

Hobbling along, François conducted the visitors toward the drawing room through a cold, gray stone hall. There was no furniture to be seen except two tall, carved chairs and an enormous shield, hanging suspended from the wall.

Inside the drawing room, however, there was a kind of shabby splendor, very interesting to the four American girls, no one of whom had seen anything like it.

On the floor was a great rug of tapestry showing nymphs and dolphins carrying wreaths of fruit and flowers woven into the design. The blue and rose and brown of the colors had so faded that they were lovelier than any artist's palette could have painted them.

The four girls sat down in chairs covered with tapestry of the same kind, which they guessed must be almost priceless in value. But there were only a few other articles of furniture in the room—a beautiful old cabinet, a mahogany table inlaid with brass, a Louis XIV sofa, while on the walls were not more than half a dozen pictures by French masters. Nevertheless, the room was complete in beauty and elegance. So the American girls did

not dream that once it had been crowded with rare treasures, sold one by one to meet the family necessities.

However, there were only a few minutes in which the guests could make a study of their surroundings. Very soon their hostess entered with old François bowing before her as if she had been an empress. She was accompanied by a young man in the uniform of a French officer.

The Countess Amélie wore a dress of black silk and on her head a cap of lace with the Marie Antoinette point in front. Her hair was exquisitely white and her eyes dark. In spite of the natural coldness and hauteur of her expression she was evidently trying to appear friendly.

Her four guests bowed gravely as she shook hands with them, welcoming them to her home. However, it must be confessed that Eugenia's bow was even more stiff than her hostess's.

Also Eugenia frowned, while the other three girls smiled. For the young officer, whom the Countess Amélie afterwards introduced as her son, was Captain Henri Castaigne, whom they had met through Lieutenant Hume in Paris, and upon whom they had seen bestowed the Cross of the Legion of Honor.

CHAPTER XI

The Prejudice Deepens

“Then you knew we were here?” Nona questioned half shyly.

Nona and Barbara were seated on a wide window seat with Captain Castaigne beside them. A little further on Eugenia, in a carved, high-back chair, was watching the group but taking little part in the conversation. Mildred and the Countess Amélie were on the opposite side of the great room, still having their coffee and chatting amiably, though in not an animated fashion. For the Countess would have scorned to speak any language but her beloved French, and while Mildred’s French was good it was not very rapid. Nevertheless, her manners were undeniably sweet and unaffected and the Countess plainly approved of her more than any one of the other girls.

Captain Castaigne smiled at Nona.

“Well, I had my suspicions,” he answered, with the faintest gleam of amusement in his dark eyes. “Moreover, I received a letter from Lieutenant Hume telling me that four American Red Cross girls had disappeared from Paris and were nursing somewhere in southern France.” The young officer bowed his head with a pretense of penitence. “Also I must confess that I have asked a few questions of old François. You see, I have only recently been transferred to a regiment near my own home, else I should have prayed for the privilege of calling upon you. But not having seen any one of you until this afternoon, I could not be sure my surmise was correct.”

In her throne-like chair Eugenia’s shoulders assumed a straighter pose, while her face turned unexpectedly scarlet.

“Are you entirely convinced you have seen *no one* of us since our meeting in Paris?” she inquired so suddenly and in such a peculiar tone, even for Eugenia, that Nona and Barbara turned to glance toward her in surprise.

Not having spoken in the past ten minutes, her eyes were now fixed upon the young French officer with an expression which Barbara Meade at least recognized. It plainly expressed disapproval.

Nevertheless, there was no reason why Captain Castaigne should instantly become embarrassed. Up to this time he had been a delightful host, gracious and gay. Certainly his manners were not like those of an American or an Englishman, but Nona and Barbara instinctively understood that his fashion of paying pretty compliments and his somewhat devoted air as he talked to one, were simply characteristics of a foreigner.

Now, however, he blushed and stammered like a school-boy. With Eugenia's gaze upon him he crimsoned and cast down his eyes.

"If I *have* seen one of you before I am sure I have not recognized you," he returned with unnecessary humility. "I have been at work with my soldiers most of the time since receiving my new command. I only return to the chateau occasionally to see my mother."

Eugenia's nostrils arched slightly in a way she had when angry.

"Do you usually pay these visits in the daytime or in the evening?" she questioned, with what seemed to the other two girls rather too much curiosity. For these were war times when one was not supposed to ask questions that were not absolutely necessary.

Still the young officer showed no resentment.

"I have no regular hour, Mademoiselle. Whenever I can be spared I desire to be with my mother. There are only the two of us and we have been much separated. First there were the years devoted to my training as a soldier and since has come the cruel fortune of war."

From the opposite side of the room the Countess Amélie must at this moment have guessed that her son was speaking of her. She looked toward him with such a combination of pride and devotion that it was almost touching. Her whole face softened.

But Eugenia did not observe her.

"I am not so sure we have not met each other in this neighborhood quite recently," she continued with extraordinary coldness. Nona and Barbara became more and more surprised. For although Eugenia was not cordial with strangers, she was usually civil. Vainly they were searching their minds for some remark with which to turn the current of the conversation when Eugenia went on:

“I was on my way home to our little farmhouse the other evening, after nursing at the field hospital until quite late. I met some one, an officer, I think. It was then too dark for me to see his face, but I have been wondering ever since——”

At this moment Eugenia’s speech was interrupted, but not by one of her companions. For the heavy door of the drawing room was pushed slowly open and a great dog walked majestically into the room.

He paused for an instant to gaze at his mistress. Then receiving her silent permission, he started a pilgrimage about the room.

Nona shrank behind the smaller Barbara, for in spite of her usual bravery she had a nervous fear of dogs. However, this great Dane was not to be feared by guests inside his own domain. As he padded from one visitor to the other it was plain that he was greeting each one of them in turn. Mildred came first and was allowed to lay her hand on his head, then Nona and Barbara. Afterwards the dog moved toward Eugenia. Within a few feet of her he paused, his ears and tail visibly drooping, and turned imploring eyes upon his young master.

Whatever the signal that passed between them, the next moment the splendid creature sank down at Eugenia’s feet, burying his head between his forepaws. His whole attitude indicated a prayer for pardon.

Immediately after Captain Castaigne got up and walked over toward Eugenia. He stood silent for half a moment, evidently hoping that she might relax from her severity.

Never in his life had he met such an extraordinary and difficult young woman! As he had been under the same impression five minutes after their introduction in Paris, why should Fate be so unkind as to cause them to see each other again? And then to place him in such an awkward position as he now found himself!

“I owe you ten thousand pardons, Mademoiselle. Ah, more than that, for I consider my own act unpardonable!” he exclaimed. “Until you spoke I had been hoping that I might be mistaken, and that it was *not* you whom I caused to suffer the other evening.”

The young Frenchman cast his eyes imploringly toward Eugenia, clasping his hands together in a dramatic fashion.

If only Eugenia had been able to smile at this moment, how much simpler the future would have been! But remember, Eugenia had a Puritan conscience, and a Puritan conscience often exacts its pound of flesh in payment for sins from other people as well as from itself. Moreover, Eugenia disliked Captain Castaigne's manners and appearance intensely. To her he appeared theatrical and insincere. A simple, straightforward American apology she believed she would have accepted at once. But this young aristocrat with his too perfect features and physique must suffer for his offense. No doubt the other girls would have forgiven him. He looked like the type of man most women would deal gently with, so Eugenia felt it would undoubtedly be good for him to be snubbed by her.

As she now stared severely at the young Frenchman in answer to his pleading, she looked like all the Pilgrim fathers' portraits that hang on old New England family walls melted together into one face. Of course, he did not understand her in the least. Lieutenant Hume had explained that the Miss Peabody he had met in Paris was an old maid from Boston. But this conveyed nothing to Captain Castaigne's mind. Old maids in France were not in the least like this young woman and he had a very vague idea of where Boston was and of what the city could be like. However, he did know that he had offended against a Frenchman's and an officer's code of manners and was therefore willing to make any possible apology.

"You will understand that not only did I not know you: I did not realize that you were a woman or I should never have sent my dog to interrupt you. Why, why did you not halt when I called out to you? If only you had given one little sign, made the least sound! I thought I should have fainted when I beheld a figure upon the ground and in the uniform of a Red Cross nurse, the uniform I respect most in all the world."

There could be no doubt of Captain Castaigne's sincerity at this moment. Nona and Barbara, who were listening with intense interest to his plea, were deeply moved by the tribute he thus paid the Red Cross work. But if Eugenia felt this she did not reveal it.

"I prefer not to discuss the accident," she returned, rising from her chair and preparing to leave. "Certainly I realize that you would not have desired to injure me personally had you known I was a Red Cross nurse. But I cannot

see that you are justified in sending that great beast of a dog to attack wayfarers, simply because you do not chance to know who they are.”

Barbara and Nona had also gotten up intending to withdraw with their friend. Actually at this moment Barbara had the temerity to giggle, although no one but Nona was aware of it. It was so absurd to hear Eugenia lecturing a French officer with regard to his duties and privileges. It was even funnier to see the spirit in which he accepted his snubbing!

“But, Mademoiselle,” he continued, shrugging his slender shoulders, decorated with the gold braid of his rank, “surely you must appreciate that in these war times we have many dangerous visitors to our entrenchments. One cannot permit a wanderer to remain at large who refuses to give an account of himself? Besides, my dog would have injured no one. He had his orders merely to hold the prisoner until I could reach him.”

Captain Castaigne laid his boyish hand on the head of the great dog, who at once rose up clumsily and stood beside him. “Some day, Mademoiselle, I shall pray that my dog and I may do you a service to atone for our mistake. To many a wounded soldier Le Duc has brought aid on the battlefield. In any case the offense was mine, while his only that of obedience to a stupid master. Say at least that you forgive my dog?”

The young officer spoke so winningly that even Eugenia was compelled to relent slightly. However, she still retained an uncomfortable vision of herself, face downward upon the ground with this young Captain Castaigne holding the light above her and gazing down on her prostrate form.

Nevertheless, she accepted the large paw that Duke stretched forth to her. As the eyes of Eugenia and the dog met, the ghost of an understanding passed between them.

The next instant, after saying farewell to their hostess, she departed, the other three Red Cross girls following her.

“What a very objectionable young woman,” the Countess Amélie remarked to her son in French, when speaking of their guests a short time afterwards. The young officer did not inquire which one of the four girls she meant.

CHAPTER XII

Not Peace But War

Later that same evening the girls were seated in their living room at the farmhouse. It was almost bed time, so heavy curtains had been drawn across their small windows, shutting out all possible vision of the outside world.

But wearing their four new kimonos the girls were grouped in characteristic attitudes about a small fireplace on the right side of the room.

Suddenly, after a warm afternoon, a November rain had fallen, bringing with it cold and dampness. So, although a fire in France is regarded as a great luxury, the American girls felt compelled to have one. It was not of the generous kind to which they were accustomed at home, but was built of carefully hoarded sticks and pine cones old François had brought them from time to time as valuable gifts. Therefore, the girls were huddled closer to the fire and to one another than under ordinary circumstances.

Just at present, however, there was no talking going on, which was most unusual, since Nona and Barbara were especially addicted to this feminine habit, while neither Eugenia nor Mildred were extraordinarily silent. However, at the moment both Mildred and Nona were writing letters, while Barbara was reading a queer, old-fashioned book she had discovered stored away in the attic of their little farmhouse. It was, of course, written in French, and she was supposed to be improving her vocabulary. But the French was so peculiar that now and then she was forced to stop to consult a dictionary.

Eugenia was also reading, although her literature was of a more serious character. She was studying a series of reports the Red Cross societies of Europe had recently issued. The papers offered important information and advice to the Red Cross nurses, and Eugenia was too deeply interested in her profession to neglect any chance for improvement.

She and Mildred were at a small table by the fire with the lamp between them, while Nona and Barbara were mounted upon sofa cushions, which they had placed on the bare floor.

By and by Barbara glanced up at the alarm clock on the mantelpiece. It was standing side by side with a tall French clock of silver gilt that must once have been a bridal offering. However, the French clock had these long years been silent, while tonight the plebeian American timepiece ticked resolutely on.

Seeing the hour, Barbara yawned, closed her book and then, clasping her hands over her knees, began rocking slowly back and forth.

No one at first paid the least attention to her.

“It is nearly bed time,” she announced finally, “and I do wish everybody would stop what they are doing and let us talk for a while. Somehow tonight I feel as if we were four girls away at a foreign boarding school, instead of four young women intent upon caring for the wounded. How wonderful if by chance we were nearing the end of this impossible war!”

After this there was another instant’s silence, though each girl was keenly aware of Barbara’s last speech. Nona looked up toward the little wooden crucifix, belonging to the owners of the farmhouse, which had been left in its honored place upon the wall. Her lips said nothing, but the appeal of her spirit went deeper than words. Mildred’s eyes suddenly blurred with tears. She had been writing to her father, whom she adored, and all at once the time seemed endless since their farewell. But Eugenia merely put down her papers and sat watching the younger girl on the floor.

Except for the fall of the rain the night was very still. There was no thunder and lightning and no wind.

Perhaps it was because of what she had just been reading, or the discomfort of her visit earlier in the afternoon, but Eugenia was feeling curiously unstrung. Somehow Barbara’s innocent remark disturbed her.

“I don’t think there is any chance of the war’s being over for many a long day, Barbara,” she returned curtly. “Just because we have been having a lull in the fighting lately you must not feel that work is over. That is, not unless you want to go home. I often think that best for all of you three young girls. If you can feel like a boarding school miss, Bab, certainly you are an infant. But it is good of you to include me among the pupils in view of what you really think about my age.”

Barbara laughed, although a little surprised and touched by a portion of the other girl's speech. For had not Eugenia called her Bab and laid her strong, fine hand on her hair? Barbara rather liked the feeling of Eugenia's fingers. They were firm and yet gentle tonight. Always Barbara knew that they were singularly handsome hands, and more than that, they were hands revealing unusual ability. They were not small, but slender and long, with beautiful almond-shaped nails and a curious, vibrant quality at the finger tips.

Barbara took one of them in her own and studied it curiously.

"You have wonderful nursing hands, Eugenia. One feels as if they could take away pain and almost bring people back to life. Of course, I know you are right about the war. It isn't over just because of the heavenly quiet we have been having lately in this neighborhood. But do let us be frivolous while we can. Mildred, you have finished your letter, haven't you? Nona, when will you ever be through? To whom on earth are you writing that you can have so much to say? Whoever he or she is I wish could see you. You look like a Fra Angelico angel in that flowing blue robe tonight."

Just long enough to blow a kiss Nona looked up. "Oh, I am writing to Dick Thornton," she explained casually. "I had a letter from him the other day asking me to tell him just what we were doing. He said Mildred would never tell him half enough."

A strange little lump mysteriously caught in Barbara's throat. Dick had not yet written her and she had thought they were as intimate friends as he and Nona. Then the smile that was characteristic of her ability to see things truthfully hovered around her lips. After all, did she really desire Dick Thornton to behold Nona tonight? Never had she seen her looking prettier! She had on a blue crêpe wrapper the color of the Italian sky, her pale yellow hair was unbound and hanging in a single long curl down her back. Moreover, the fire had flushed her cheeks and made her dark eyes shine.

Then noticing that Eugenia's eyes were studying her gravely, Barbara shook her head and laughed.

"I have a perfectly delicious piece of gossip to confide, if you will all listen. If you don't I'm going to bed this minute."

Nona sealed her letter.

“What on earth are you talking about, Barbara?” she demanded. “How can you have heard any more gossip than the rest of us? You can’t have found a lost will or a lost romance in that old book you dug out of the attic.”

Having at last gained the desired attention of her audience, the youngest of the four Red Cross girls was not disposed to hurry.

“Well, no, not exactly,” she hedged. “And yet I have been amusing myself fitting the two stories together. Remember the young girl we saw dancing for the soldiers the other afternoon?”

“Goodness, yes,” Eugenia replied. “But what a surprising person you are, Barbara. She is about the last person in the world I would have guessed you had in mind. What on earth made you think of her again?”

Holding up three fingers, Barbara counted them out slowly. “One, two, three things made me think of her. Now listen to me attentively, for ‘hereby hangs a tale.’ And perhaps if we exercise enough imagination we can turn it into the oldest romance of the Troubadours, those poets of old Provence whose names stand high in the records of song and story. Remember the tale of ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’ is over seven hundred years old! We may have to make a few changes to fit it into modern times.”

Mildred Thornton made no effort to stifle her yawn.

“Oh, goodness gracious, do go on and get to your story or I shall retire to bed. At least I remember that the blond young soldier told you the little dancing girl’s name was Nicolette. It was odd for you to come across the poem so unexpectedly tonight. I read it long ago in my literature class at school. But where, please, is ‘Aucassin,’ the hero of your tale, and where, for that matter, is Nicolette? You told me that she was supposed to disappear after her dance and no one knew what had become of her,” Mildred protested.

Barbara turned appealingly to Eugenia. “Do make Mildred hush and not take the fine flavor from my romance,” she begged. “The young soldier may not have known where the young dancing girl lives, but I do. Indeed, we all passed her home this afternoon. Didn’t you see a little scarlet cap on the bayberry bush outside the old hut in the woods? Well, Nicolette has been living there recently, with an old grandmother, or an old woman of some

kind. She is the adopted daughter of some mysterious person, I am told. You recall that Nicolette was a slave girl owned by a viscount?"

Eugenia got up slowly out of her chair.

"I don't mean to be rude, child, but really I have to attend to some things before I go to bed and your story seems rather far fetched. Tell us who Nicolette's adoring lover is and wait until tomorrow for the rest."

Barbara shrugged her shoulders petulantly.

"Of all the disagreeable audiences this is the worst!" she asserted. "I thought maybe you might be interested in something except horrors. The story is that this little gypsy girl is really very much in love with Captain Castaigne, whom we saw this afternoon. That is, she may not be exactly in love with him, but the soldiers think she is. His mother is terribly angry, because, of course, they belong to one of the oldest families in France while she is 'Poor Little Miss Nobody of Nowhere.' Then another romantic point is that the little blond soldier who gave us the flowers is enamored of Nicolette. Monsieur Bébé is what the other soldiers call him, so I wasn't so far wrong in thinking he looked like a baby."

Barbara did not observe that Eugenia was frowning majestically and that Mildred Thornton looked rather bored.

Nona, however, was smiling good-humoredly.

"Hurry up and finish, Barbara. Is Captain Castaigne pining away for the fair Nicolette, refusing to be a knight or to bear arms for his country? I thought he was supposed to be an extraordinary young officer," Nona questioned.

Undoubtedly Barbara was crestfallen.

"I suppose that is the weakest part of the story," she confessed. "I don't know whether Captain Castaigne cares for this particular Nicolette in the least. He does not care for anything but his beloved country, I believe. But if you won't be interested in my romance, please listen to the first part of my poem," Barbara begged, picking up her discarded book. "There is a translation here of the first verse:

"Who would list in right good verse
Tale of grief full sad to hear,

Of two children young and fair,
Nicolete and Aucassin;
Of the woes he had to bear
And the doughty deeds to dare
For his love with face so clear?
Sweet the song, the fable rare,
Courtly and well served the fare;
No man is so full of care,
None so wretched, none so bare,
So o'erdriven by despair
But the hearing will repair,
Give him jollity to spare,
So rich the tale."

As she finished the verse Eugenia reached down and taking hold of Barbara lifted her to her feet.

"You are perfectly absurd with your little love tale, dear, and I don't see the least point in it. Still, it has been nice and restful to have had a quiet evening like this. Perhaps it is better for us to forget the tragedies about us now and then. Besides, I expect I need more education in romance. But go upstairs to bed, all of you at once. I'll close up the house for the night."

Eugenia shooed the three girls away as if they had been chickens and she a guardian hen. But after they left her she did not start upon her task at once. Instead she stood with her hands clasped looking down into the fire.

Outside the rain must have ceased for she no longer heard the noise of it. Indeed, the world seemed strangely quiet to ears accustomed to the cannonading she had heard so often in the past months.

But she was not thinking of this at the present moment, but of her visit to the chateau earlier in the afternoon. The call had not been an agreeable one, for she had never felt more ill at ease. However, Eugenia made up her mind that she would never accept an invitation there again. She might then escape meeting either the Countess or her son. And with this thought in mind she stopped to put out the last flickering flames of the fire.

There she remained crouched in the same position for five minutes, while upstairs in their bedrooms the other three American Red Cross girls were

almost equally inanimate. For after the quiet of the night their ears and hearts were suddenly stunned by a burst of terrific artillery firing. It was as if all the heavy guns of all the armies in Europe were concentrated upon this particular quarter in France.

By and by Eugenia rose up wearily with her face whiter and older than it had been for some time.

“I am afraid the Germans have not retreated of their own accord,” she said, unconsciously speaking aloud. “We may have some hard days ahead of us. But if they do manage to force the French line of trenches and reach us, I shall not care so much if only the other girls can get away. It will not so much matter with a woman as old as I am, and I shall be glad to be useful.”

CHAPTER XIII

Danger

All night the bombardment continued. Now and then the girls slept, but more often they lay awake, wondering just where the fighting could be taking place and if the field hospital could be in danger.

But at daylight the noise grew less and three of the girls fell into deeper slumber than they had known since saying good-night to one another.

But Eugenia did not wish to sleep again. Very quietly she got up and went about their little house hiding away their stores of provisions. Then she locked up odd windows and doors that might by chance be forgotten. Afterwards she investigated her own bag of nursing supplies and saw that everything that might be needed for emergency work was there.

Although it was still between five and six o'clock, Eugenia next made things ready for breakfast and then went upstairs and waked the other girls. Well she knew that their services would be needed earlier than usual that morning! The night's fighting meant many more wounded, who would be brought to them for succor as soon as possible.

Therefore, once they were up and dressed, the girls naturally wished to be off to their work at once. Yet against their wills Eugenia insisted that they eat unusually large breakfasts. She even packed a basket of food for them to take to the hospital, although their noonday meal was always given them there.

However, nothing was said at breakfast about her proceedings, but later Barbara followed Eugenia about their little house, regarding her suspiciously.

Desultory firing was still going on; occasionally one could hear the cracking of a score of rifles or the shriek of a bursting shell. But this had become a common experience in the past nine months to the American Red Cross girls and would hardly explain Eugenia's unusually serious view of the situation.

Finally Barbara managed to corner the older girl in the kitchen, where she laid her hand quietly on her arm.

“Tell me, Eugenia, please, have you any special reason for believing that the fighting is to be more serious in this neighborhood than any we have yet seen? Have the soldiers or officers told you to expect unusual trouble? Tell me the truth. I would rather know, and I think I can promise not to be such a coward as I was when our war nursing started.”

For a moment Eugenia hesitated. Her face was serious but not severe this morning and the two expressions were very unlike.

“I am going to tell you exactly the truth, Barbara, when I say that no one has given me information of any kind. I have only heard, just as you have, that after months of fighting in this locality the Germans evacuated their trenches and moved back of the line of their own accord. But the truth is, I have been feeling horribly uneasy ever since I became aware of the impression this had made on the French army near here. I have always feared it was a piece of clever strategy on the part of the Germans to gain time and perhaps to bring up more guns. And all last night, while the cannonading was going on, after weeks of comparative quiet, I became more and more convinced of my idea. Of course, it may be absurd, but just the same I have the feeling that we ought to be prepared for perhaps the most strenuous times of our lives.”

Suddenly Eugenia placed her hands on either side Barbara's cheeks, which had grown round and rosy as a child's again, with the weeks of outdoor life and the easier work.

“I want you to promise me something, Barbara; promise for yourself and if you can to use your influence with the other girls. If by chance the enemy should conquer this part of France and our field hospital be forced to move further back, you will go back with them. But if anything should happen to make this impossible, go to the Countess Amélie and remain with her. She is a stranger, but she is an older woman and I'd feel ever so much happier to have you under her protection.”

Trying her best to show no signs of uneasiness at Eugenia's speech, nevertheless Barbara Meade's face unconsciously whitened and her blue eyes grew dark.

“That is a rather impossible promise,” she returned, smiling, although her voice was not quite steady. “Of course, I am not convinced that you are right in your fears in the first place, but if you should be, why are you asking me to influence the other girls to leave this neighborhood? You have a great deal more influence than I have. Do you mean that you don’t intend to go with us?”

At this the older girl walked across the room and stood for a moment by the one window which looked out upon the woods. If she had wished to reply at once it would have been impossible. For at this instant a tremendous shell exploded at no great distance away, shaking the little house and making a noise that was almost deafening.

Yet neither girl mentioned the occurrence to the other.

When it was over Eugenia turned quietly around.

“I expect to remain here if I find I can be more useful. But after all, I may be talking like a foolish old crow croaking over misfortunes that never come. Goodness knows, the French have repelled numbers of attacks before! Even if the Germans have reinforcements they will probably drive them back. I only wanted us to be prepared to meet the worst. But I’m dreadfully sorry if I have frightened you unnecessarily, so perhaps it will be best not to speak of my foolishness to the other girls. Now let’s hurry and be off.”

But Barbara would not be hurried, neither would she be silenced.

She sat down for a moment on the top of a high wooden stool, her feet swinging in the air, looking like a little girl of fourteen, in spite of the fact that she wore her nurse’s cap and uniform.

“I think you forget that we are Red Cross nurses,” Barbara argued thoughtfully, talking not so much to her companion as to herself. “So even if the Germans do take the trenches in this vicinity and occupy the French country, we shall be perfectly safe. Our Red Cross badges are our protection.”

The older girl put her arm across the younger one’s shoulder, not affectionately, but protectingly.

“More than probably you are right, Barbara. But somehow I’d feel happier not to have you girls too near here. Many of the houses may be burned and the German soldiers excited by their triumph. It would be the same in any conquered country, I have no doubt. I do not mean that I think the German soldiers more brutal than other men under like conditions. But remember, we have been living in an enemy’s country and nursing their soldiers and even if ninety-nine of the soldiers were considerate, one might be rough and unkind. Of course, I can’t make you promise to do what I ask against your will, but if the danger comes will you remember what I have said and try and be prudent?”

And Barbara nodded as she got off her stool.

“I won’t say anything to the others, but I am going to put the Red Cross flag on our little house before we leave,” she answered, speaking in the most matter-of-fact tone. “It can’t do any possible harm and I think might have been a good idea all along to advertise us to our neighbors. Dear little ‘House with the Blue Front Door,’ I hope we may not leave you in many months! Somehow I have grown deeply attached to you!”

A little while afterwards the four girls started for the field hospital, which was situated about a mile on this side of the last row of the French trenches.

Although they had been up for some time, it was not more than half-past six when they set out. The air was still and heavy with smoke. It would have been difficult to decide whether the noise of the distant guns or the ominous lull in the firing was more trying to the nerves.

But the girls did not discuss the situation as they walked along. Indeed, they did not talk at all, but plodded quietly ahead, intent on the work before them and saving all their strength until then.

A short distance from the field hospital they were met by two of the hospital assistants. One of them joined Eugenia, the other kept in the group with the other three girls. They were two American college boys.

“Things are pretty lively around here, Miss Peabody. I suppose you have been hearing the racket all night. The news is that the Germans have captured thirty yards of the first line of the French trenches, but of course we are expecting the Frenchies to get them back again. Still, it might have

been wiser if you had stayed in your own place today. Your house is a little farther back.”

Eugenia smiled in a friendly fashion at her companion. She was surprisingly popular with the staff at the field hospital, although ordinarily having little to say to them except upon matters concerning her nursing. But the young fellow who had walked out to meet them was a Harvard University boy who had come to France to assist with the field hospital work. He was one of fourteen or fifteen young fellows who were able to take down or set up one of the new field hospitals, consisting of some twenty tents, in about half an hour.

Naturally as he and Eugenia hailed from the Bay State, there was that bond between them.

“Have they been bringing in many wounded this morning?” Eugenia asked as quietly as if she had been discussing an ordinary topic.

Her companion nodded. “It has been pretty bad,” he returned, trying to speak with an affectation of carelessness. The fact is he had intended studying to be a surgeon after graduating at college and of course should not be upset by a few wounded men. But it wasn’t very jolly to see a lot of fellows suffering and not to be able to help them.

“Then I expect we had best hurry,” Eugenia answered. Afterwards neither of them spoke again. Yet the young man looked at Eugenia admiringly. Perhaps she was not as much of a beauty as two of the other American Red Cross girls. Nevertheless, she wasn’t bad looking in her way, and certainly a man would like to have her take care of him if he happened to be bowled over. You could always count on her being right there when the time came, and knowing exactly what to do. One couldn’t help admiring efficiency in this world wherever one saw it.

Certainly the American boy had been right in his statement. Conditions at the field hospital were pretty bad when the four girls arrived there.

All the beds in the tents were filled with the wounded. Yet every five or ten minutes another injured soldier requiring immediate care would be borne to the hospital by his companions until long lines of them were stretched out upon the grass. Moreover, one knew that there were perhaps hundreds of

others lying hurt in the trenches to whom no relief could be given until the fighting ceased.

Now there seemed little prospect that a lull could come until the night. Then perhaps the bombarding would not be so continuous.

However, the Germans must have previously located the weak points in the enemy's defences since the cannonading had begun the night before.

Three or four hours passed and no one appeared to think there could be danger at the field hospital. Perhaps they were too busy to think at all. Besides, the firing seemed to be directed upon the trenches, so that only an occasional shell, failing to hit its mark, shrieked over them or burst at a distance too far away to cause alarm.

But it must have been about noon, though no one knew the exact hour, when suddenly news came that the French had been forced to retreat from the front trenches to the second line. Then immediately after the Germans directed a number of their large guns, not upon the trenches, but upon the little town of Le Prêtre, which lay behind the field hospital, the forest and the chateau of the Countess Amélie.

Nor did the shells and shrapnel continue to pass over the hospital. Indeed, they sometimes seemed to be the actual target of the great guns, though this was of course not true.

One of the white tents was torn to pieces and a doctor and two nurses hurt.

Barbara had just come out of this tent on an errand for the surgeon. After the explosion she found herself standing but a few yards from the débris, with Nona Davis running toward her.

"The field hospital is to be moved, Barbara dear, and they wish all of us to go along with them. Eugenia and Mildred cannot leave, but you and I are to go back to our little house and pack up the things we actually must have. Everything and everybody connected with the hospital must be on the move in the next half hour. There is a chance that the French may retreat beyond the village, so as to force the enemy out of their trenches into the open fields. Come, we must run for it. I don't see how we shall ever manage to get to our home and back in such a short time. But we can help to bring up the rear."

Nona slipped her arm through Barbara's and the two girls started back for
"The House with the Blue Front Door."

CHAPTER XIV

The Parting of the Ways

The two girls reached the farmhouse in a shorter time than they had believed possible and at once rushed upstairs to their rooms. There they dragged out their suit-cases, and Mildred's and Eugenia's as well, and began packing them with the clothes they felt to be absolutely necessary for their work.

They knew the wounded must first be removed from the field hospital, with only the nurse and doctors who would have charge of them. But there would also be other motor cars to transport the additional nurses, physicians and hospital assistants. Moreover, since all the tents and the supplies must afterwards be gotten away this would surely require a fair amount of time. So in case they were late and missed the first of the departing cars, they would certainly be stored away in one of the later ones.

"I do wish we had asked Eugenia and Mildred to wait until we returned to the hospital before they leave," Barbara called from beneath the bed in Mildred's room, where she was dragging out a pair of shoes.

"It wouldn't have made any difference if we had asked," Nona answered. "Mildred is to go in one of the first motor ambulances with the wounded, as she has charge of two critically ill soldiers. And of course Eugenia will do whatever she thinks wisest. Certainly she won't wait for us if she thinks it best to go first."

"I am not so sure of that," Barbara replied, and then there was a silence lasting for several moments.

Afterwards Barbara and Nona wondered why they were not more frightened during this half hour. The fact is that they had not yet appreciated the seriousness of the French retreat, nor the great task of moving the field hospital beyond the present danger line.

Moreover, they were too busy to think clearly on any subject, and a time of action is seldom a time of fear.

Except for the two girls moving hastily about, the little farmhouse was delightfully quiet and peaceful after the dreadful morning at the hospital. Once the thought flashed through Barbara Meade's mind: "If only they might stay here in the little 'House with the Blue Front Door' and take their chances with the enemy!" They would be under the protection of the Red Cross. However, as they had received their orders from an authority higher than Eugenia's, like soldiers they must do as they were commanded, without considering their personal inclinations.

So Barbara, having finished Mildred's packing, took her suit-case downstairs by the front door. She then went up for Eugenia's, which Nona had by this time completed. It was heavier than the other and she staggered a little and had to stop to recover her breath after she had placed it alongside Mildred's.

Therefore, she chanced to be standing just beside the front door when the first knocking on the outside began. Nona had drawn a great, old-fashioned bolt across the door after entering, chiefly with the idea that they should not be disturbed at their tasks.

Barbara did not open the door at once.

This knocking was not of an ordinary kind, such as one would expect from a visitor. It was very insistent, never stopping for a second; it was indeed, a kind of hurried tattoo.

"Who is there?" Barbara demanded. But before any one else could reply Nona called from upstairs.

"Please don't open the door, Barbara, at least not until we are about to start. There isn't an instant to waste in talking to any one."

In consequence Barbara turned away, but immediately after she recognized the voice of old François.

"Open, open!" he shouted, first in French and then in English, having acquired a few words from his four American girl friends.

Then Barbara drew back the latch and François tumbled in.

The old fellow's brown face was ashen and the pupils of his little black eyes were dilated with fear.

He had evidently been running until he was almost out of breath.

“The French are retreating, all our army at once: They are tramping, tramping through the fields and the woods. Madame the Countess says you are to come to the chateau immediately. Soon the Germans will be here and then——”

The old French peasant flung out his withered hands and rolled his eyes upward. Words failed to express his pent-up emotions.

But Barbara shook her head quietly.

“You are very kind, François. Tell the Countess Amélie we are most grateful for her thought of us. But we are going to the rear with the field hospital staff and in any case we should be safe as Red Cross nurses. Go back to her now, for she needs you more than we do. This must be a terrible experience for her.”

Old François straightened his crooked back against the front door, which he had most carefully closed after entering.

“But you must come and at once, Mademoiselle. For the Countess is ill, perhaps dying from the shock of the news we have just received,” he insisted. “Her son’s, Captain Henri’s, regiment has been destroyed. Some of the men have been taken prisoners, the others killed or wounded. And we have had no word from our young captain since the fighting began.”

The old servant’s face worked with emotion and his eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” Barbara murmured pitifully, and then realizing the inadequacy of words at such a time, turned to Nona, who had at this instant come downstairs, carrying her own and Barbara’s bags.

“What shall we do, Nona?” Barbara demanded. “We should have started back to the field hospital before this. And yet if we go now and leave the Countess ill with no one to look after her, it seems too cruel! Suppose I go with François and you return to the hospital and explain what has delayed me. Tell Eugenia where I am. Somehow I feel that perhaps the Countess Amélie needs my care more than the soldiers do today. There are so many other nurses to look after them, while she is old and alone.”

Nona’s dark eyes looked troubled, nevertheless she shook her head.

“I don’t agree with you, Barbara. We ought to be at our posts. We have promised our services to the soldiers; besides, I could not let you go alone to the Countess. Don’t you know that when the German soldiers overrun this countryside the chateau will be one of the first places to be seized? It is the most important house in the neighborhood and the German officers are sure to take up their headquarters there.” Nona held out her hand to François.

“I too am sorrier than I can say, but we can’t do what you ask of us,” she declared, “we must go back to our work. Please try and make the Countess Amélie understand. Now good-by, François, and may we meet again in happier times. You must move away from the door and let us be off, for we are dreadfully late already from talking to you.”

But old François did not stir.

“You have lived in Madame’s house, you have eaten of her food, and yet when she may be dying you will not serve her. Because you wear on your arm the badge of the *Croix de Rouge*, does it mean that you care only for soldiers? Because Madame is a woman and an old one, you feel no interest in her! Truly if she dies this war will have killed her, for one does not die only from wounds of the flesh.”

Barbara’s blue eyes had slowly filled with tears during the old peasant’s speech. But now a resolute line formed about the corners of her pretty mouth that only showed there occasionally.

“I am going to the Countess, Nona,” she remarked quietly. “You must do whatever your conscience prompts you to do. Mine tells me that we have accepted a great deal from the Countess and now she needs me more than any one else. If the hospital staff consider me a deserter, I cannot help it. Besides, I almost promised Eugenia that I would go to the Countess Amélie if the Germans conquered this part of the countryside. It was for another reason I promised, but tell her, please, and she will understand. Good-by; I’ll join you as soon as possible. Don’t worry about me.”

Barbara stooped and picked up her bag.

“I’ll find my way to the chateau alone. Fortunately, I know the way,” she added. “François, you must go with Miss Davis, so as to carry the other suit-cases. Then you’ll come back to Madame as quickly as possible.”

Taking a watch out of her pocket, Nona now glanced at it.

“I am coming with you, Barbara. Already we are nearly an hour behind the time when the field hospital expected to be on its way. If I return now I shall either find that everybody and everything has departed, or else it will merely be an additional trouble to dispose of me at the last. A day’s loss of *my* services cannot make such a great difference. So we can first find out how greatly the Countess Amélie needs us, and then tomorrow, one or both of us must somehow manage to rejoin the army. The French retreat may not be so universal as we fear.”

By this time the blue front door had been flung open by François, so that outside the girls could hear the tramping of many feet. But the feet were moving with a rhythmical swing that proved the French soldiers were at least retreating in good order. So far there had been no rout by the enemy.

Now François was in the greatest hurry of the three. He had taken Barbara’s bag out of her hand and now laid hold of Nona’s. Then he set off, trotting so rapidly down the path, in spite of his age and crooked legs, that the two girls could scarcely keep up with him. Afterwards he led their way into the woods, skirting along by the edge of the trees and keeping safely out of sight of the soldiers, although numbers of them were marching through the same woods on the farther side.

It was by this time early in the afternoon, but the girls found the chateau undisturbed. Indeed, the autumn sun shone down upon it with the same tranquillity as though the world had been at peace instead of war. Across the neglected lawn a peacock stalked as majestically and disdainfully as if the old gardens had been filled with the belles and beaux in the silks and satins of a more picturesque age.

However, the two American girls were living in a too tragically workaday world. They had no thought and no time for beauty, since a shorter and more compelling word urged them on.

The lower part of the old chateau was deserted, and as neither Nona nor Barbara knew the way upstairs, François preceded them. He opened first the door of the Countess Amélie’s room, but found it empty. Without hesitating, he then turned and walked quickly down a narrow corridor to another room

at almost the opposite end of the house. Knocking at this door and receiving no answer, he crept in softly, beckoning to the two girls to follow him.

But this room was so vast that neither Nona nor Barbara immediately discovered its occupant. Evidently it was a man's room and must have covered the entire southern end of the chateau. Yet it was almost bare of furniture of a conventional kind. On the walls old muskets hung and bayonets of a bygone generation. The floor was of stone, uncarpeted, and there were only two chairs, a tall chest of drawers and a single iron bed in the apartment. If the young Captain Castaigne was a dandy, as Eugenia considered him, certainly there was nothing about his room to suggest it!

But Barbara was first to reach the bed, because she first saw that the Countess Amélie had thrown herself upon it. She may have fainted earlier in the day and thus alarmed François, but at present she showed no signs of serious illness. Her face was drawn with suffering, nevertheless she attempted to rise and speak to her guests as soon as Barbara approached. The Countess Amélie belonged to the ancient aristocracy of France whose women went to the guillotine with smiles upon their faces. It was a part of their pride of class not to betray their deeper emotions.

Yet Barbara found the small hand held out to her extremely cold, and it was with an effort that the older woman found herself able to stand.

"I am more than glad you have been able to reach the chateau, Miss Meade," she began. "Doubtless you know as well as I do that our French army is in retreat and that the German army may occupy this neighborhood at any hour. But where are your other two friends? I promised my son that in case of danger I would send for you. He could not contemplate the thought of your being alone if the barbarians overwhelmed us."

The Countess spoke quietly enough, yet there was bitter antagonism in her voice. One could hardly expect a French woman to feel otherwise at an hour like this. Remember also that this was a portion of France near the border of Alsace-Lorraine, which the Germans took as a part of their booty at the close of the Franco-Prussian war.

The French people had not recovered from the bitterness of that defeat when the great war began.

Barbara was looking somewhat nonplussed at finding that the Countess was not in need of her services as a nurse, so she allowed Nona to join her and make the first reply.

“We were under the impression that you were ill and needed us, or we should not have come,” Nona answered. “The field hospital has been moved and we intended leaving with them, so we should have been as safe as possible. Our friends, Miss Thornton and Miss Peabody, have gone on with the staff. Still, we appreciate your wishing to protect us,” she ended gently.

In reality, both Nona and Barbara were deeply chagrined at the position in which they now found themselves. Yet there was no doubt that the older woman had meant to be kind. Besides, nothing could be gained by making a protest now.

Both girls accompanied the Countess Amélie out of the room.

“I am alone here, except for François,” she explained. “If the Germans come this way, doubtless my chateau will be one of the first places which they will require for their own use. Therefore, it is necessary that we be ready to leave at once. You need not be frightened; François, will go with us, and there is a secret passage leading away from the chateau, through which we can make our escape without danger. I am going to ask you to help me pack a small store of provisions, as I think we will be happier with work to occupy our hands.”

Not a word of her anguish over her son’s uncertain fate, nor a protest at being forced in her old age to turn her back upon the home of her ancestors! Surely this was aristocracy of the spirit as well as of class, Nona and Barbara both thought to themselves, although neither said a word to the other upon the subject.

That afternoon, between five and six o’clock, François brought word that the German army had captured the last line of French trenches and would soon overflow into the countryside.

Ten minutes later the Countess Amélie, Nona, Barbara and François, voluntarily deserting the chateau, started upon an uncertain journey to overtake the retreating French army.

CHAPTER XV

The Other Two Girls

Just as Nona and Barbara had anticipated, Mildred Thornton rode away with her two patients in one of the first motor ambulances that hurriedly withdrew from the field hospital to remove the wounded from the scene of danger. But by another strange mischance Eugenia was left behind.

She had, of course, continued to assist with the hospital work so long as there was anything for her to do. However, she had previously insisted that she be allowed to depart in one of the last of the motor vans. For the truth is she was unwilling to desert the neighborhood until Nona and Barbara, having returned from the farmhouse, were able to go along with her.

So during the last quarter of an hour, when only the tents were left to be piled upon the last trucks, Eugenia, having no more duties to perform, wandered a short distance away. She only went about an eighth of a mile along the path that led in the direction of the farmhouse and there sat down under a tree to wait for the other two girls and to watch for a prearranged signal.

Until she began to rest Eugenia really had no idea of how tired she was. She had been up and at work since five o'clock that morning under conditions that would have exhausted the strongest person in the world.

Now there were deafening noises reverberating all about her, while over her head hung a heavy pall of smoke, sometimes darkening the atmosphere, but now and then lifting enough to permit a shaft of light from the November sun to shine through.

At present the firing suggested that the fighting was still at some distance away, nevertheless the girl realized that the battle must be drawing nearer and nearer, for already a portion of the retreating French army had passed within sight of the disbanded hospital.

Eugenia was not conscious of being as greatly depressed by the French defeat as the other three American Red Cross girls had been. Her chief thought was the appalling increase of the wounded that this day's battle

must have caused. At this moment there must be hundreds, perhaps thousands of boys and men lying wounded and dying in the fields and trenches with no one to bring them aid.

“If only one could do *more* to help!” the girl murmured, clasping her hands wearily together in her lap, but at the same time keeping her eyes fixed upon the path ahead.

“Why in the world don’t those children come on?” she next asked impatiently. “Certainly they should not have been trusted to undertake our packing. I don’t doubt they are putting our new Paris clothes into the bags!”

As she made this speech, believing that she heard some one approaching, Eugenia half rose. Then the next instant she was up and standing with her back braced against the tree, upon which she had been previously resting. For bounding toward her, with his tongue hanging out and his head lolling from side to side, was the dog belonging to Captain Henri Castaigne.

After her past experience it was impossible for Eugenia not to feel nervous, for the silver-gray brute was of enormous size and strength. Yet when the dog reached her side, for the second time he crouched down at Eugenia’s feet. This time, however, instead of hanging *down* his head, he turned his gray-brown eyes upward upon the girl’s with such a depth of entreaty that, without knowing why, she was moved.

“It is all right, Duke, I forgive you all the past, even if I have not forgiven your master!” she exclaimed, speaking in a friendly tone, although scorning to use the dog’s French name. “But do run home now to your mistress. For this, I trust, is a final farewell between us, as we shall probably never meet again.”

Even though she spoke thus lightly, Eugenia was conscious that there might be a possible tragedy in the fact that Duke could not return to his master. Perhaps Captain Castaigne was even now among the missing.

However, the great Dane gave no sign of having heard Eugenia’s command, but instead gave her another look of profound appeal. When she showed no indication of having understood his meaning, he got up and caught her dress firmly between his teeth. Then not ungently but authoritatively he began dragging her along with him.

For the first moment Eugenia was too surprised to make any special resistance. The next she called out angrily to the dog to let go; and then, finding he had no idea of obeying her, tore her coat from between his clenched teeth.

Duke's answer was to gaze at her reproachfully and then to gather a larger portion of her clothing in his mouth and start off faster the second time, with the girl obliged to follow.

Naturally Eugenia was angry. This objectionable dog appeared designed by fate to be a nuisance to her. Yet she was unable to make up her mind what to do. She could tear herself away again with another disastrous result to her clothing; besides, the dog would doubtless seize hold on her again. And to struggle with the enormous creature could only bring misfortune upon herself, since there was no doubt of Duke's determination.

So for twenty yards or more Eugenia moved along without further protest, then she concluded to call and summon some one to her assistance. No one chanced to be in sight, but there were, of course, several of the hospital workers not far away, so that in case Duke turned dangerous a shot would quickly put an end to him.

With this thought in mind Eugenia again looked at the dog. He was such a magnificent creature it would be a tragedy to kill him. Besides, was she not so sick at heart at all the unnecessary waste of death that she would not voluntarily destroy the tiniest spark of life?

Something of this feeling must have at this instant communicated itself to Duke's intelligence, for suddenly and of his own accord he released Eugenia's dress. But instead of leaving her he walked on a few steps further, stopped, turned around again and made a second appeal and then went slowly on a few feet more.

Afterwards Eugenia decided that she must have been abnormally dull at this time. But then her attention had been so concentrated upon the hope of Barbara's and Nona's immediate return. For it was not until Duke had made his third demand that his purpose finally occurred to her. Of course, he wished her to go with him to find some lost place or person.

Eugenia never considered the possible distance that she might be expected to travel, for all at once she seemed curiously under the domination of the

dog's desire. For she straightway put her hand reassuringly upon Duke's collar.

"It is all right, old fellow, I understand at last and will come along with you," she said aloud.

Then in a perfectly matter-of-fact fashion Eugenia moved along by the dog's side. Soon after she knew that he was leading her in the direction of the French trenches which were directly within the firing line. However, it did not strike her that she was facing any greater peril than she and the field hospital staff had been enduring all day. For one grows accustomed to war's horrors as well as to most other things.

Nevertheless, Eugenia flinched many times as the dog led the way, walking now and then beside men's bodies that did not stir either at their approach or after their passing. Yet Red Cross nurses must learn a certain amount of stoicism to be of real value in their work.

Once or twice Eugenia wondered if she could possibly manage to finish the task Duke required of her in time to leave with the last of the field hospital staff, yet it was odd how secondary this idea became.

Some other guiding force had taken possession of her at the time, for the purpose in hand seemed the one thing supremely worth while.

Only through one's imagination can the picture of a battlefield be really seen, for even when the eyes behold it, the spirit must act as its interpreter.

For nearly a year Eugenia had been nursing the soldiers in this worst of all possible wars, yet it was not until this afternoon that she had ever visited a battleground while the fighting was going on.

But fortunately the field to which Duke brought her was no longer a center of the firing. The field lay just behind a trench which but a few hours before had been a target for German artillery. However, the trench had already been captured, so that many of the soldiers who lay dead upon the ground had been killed during their effort to retreat.

Therefore the accident that occurred was not one which could have been reasonably expected.

With his great head bowed Duke was treading slowly, as if he realized the ugliness of the human tragedy surrounding them. Neither was Eugenia

thinking of herself; nevertheless, a moment later and she lay stretched upon the battleground, as still and unconscious as any of the recumbent figures by whom she had so lately passed.

There for hours Duke stood sentinel beside her, yet not knowing whether he should go or remain. For while love compelled him in one direction, his sense of honor constrained him to stay by the companion who had fallen by his side.

Did Duke realize his own responsibility in the catastrophe, that his honor prevailed?

The entire afternoon passed and finally evening came and yet Eugenia did not stir. She looked an incongruous figure on the field of the dead. For although she wore her nursing cloak it had floated open as she fell, revealing her woman's uniform with the cross of crimson upon her arm.

CHAPTER XVI

The Discovery

But between eight and nine o'clock on that same evening Eugenia opened her eyes. She was unable to think clearly at first and stared in amazement at the canopy of blue sky above her head. What had become of the familiar ceiling of her room at the farmhouse?

But then her head was aching dully so that it made her more uncomfortable to try to think at all. She did not even wish to call for the other girls, because Barbara would probably come to her in a little while. She remembered that Barbara had been especially kind when she had just such another absurd headache a short time before.

Closing her eyes again, Eugenia rested. But something warm and soft seemed to be moving about near her face, breathing over her in a curious, enveloping fashion impossible from a human being. It was like a damp cloud.

Putting out her hand, Eugenia touched Duke's moist nose, and then almost instantly returned to a knowledge of the situation.

She recalled in detail the events of the past afternoon, but could find no explanation for her own presence here upon the ground among the wounded. For she was not suffering sufficient pain to suggest that she had been shot by a stray rifle ball from the enemy's lines. Moreover, Eugenia found that she could move both her arms and legs without difficulty. They were stiff, but that may have been due either to fatigue or to her position upon the earth. However, the ache in her head continued so that Eugenia put up her fingers to her temple. There was a curious something clotted on her hair at the left side, which she at once knew to be blood.

Then she understood what had happened. A piece of shell from an exploding bomb must have struck and stunned her into unconsciousness. However, it must have come from such a distance that it had spent its force, for she was not seriously injured. Already the slight scalp wound had closed and was no longer bleeding.

Eugenia rose up slowly to a sitting position, realizing fully the gravity of her situation. Yet she would not allow herself to reflect upon its horrors. She must decide what she should best do. Would it be wiser to stay where she was for the rest of the night or try to seek assistance? Yet what had taken place in the countryside during the afternoon while she lay in a stupor? Were the French or the Germans in possession of the neighborhood?

However, Eugenia was not to be allowed to reach her decision alone. For no sooner had she gotten up than Duke once more began pulling at her dress, very softly at first, as one who has respect for an invalid, but no less insistently.

A dog's devotion and a dog's persistence are two qualities worthy of human admiration and wonder.

At this moment Eugenia felt both. She laid her hand quietly and affectionately on Duke's head.

"I can't go with you again. I am too used up, Duke, to help you find your friend. You would simply have another victim on your hands. But you need stay with *me* no longer. I shall wait here for you until daylight."

But though Eugenia waved her hand in token of dismissal and farewell, the dog did not leave her, although he seemed to appreciate the fact that she was unable to accompany him. For he gave up his hold on her and merely sat down reflectively by her side, as if he too were trying to decide what course it was wise to pursue.

It was plain that Duke was wretchedly unhappy. If he could not show his grief in a human fashion, he had his own especial methods. When Eugenia put her arm about his body she could feel the anguished beating of his heart.

"I wonder who it can be, Duke, that you wish to find so ardently?" the girl questioned. "Surely some one whom you love very deeply! I am sorry to be so useless and it is dreadful to think of your friend's long waiting for your return, so you must go, Duke, even if I cannot go with you. Then if you are no longer needed, come back to me."

Eugenia made this long speech aloud in a pleading tone, nevertheless she again discovered that it was easier to say what this great dog should do than to force him to obey one's will.

Yet while Eugenia was reflecting upon this fact she had her moment of inspiration. She knew that in many parts of the army dogs had been trained for searching out the wounded. Only a short time before in the papers distributed by the French Red Cross Society she had read that these dogs were sent forth with long ropes tied about their necks, so that when possible the wounded were thus dragged to places of aid.

Eugenia had no rope, but one often wonders why women are accused of being without inventive talents. So far it is true that only a few of their inventions have been of world value; to find them one must seek among the homes. This American girl at once slipped off her long cloth nursing coat. It was of strong, well-woven material, yet she managed within a few moments to tear it into strips and then to knot the strips firmly together.

Then she tied the long cord about Duke's neck. One could not tell whether the dog would understand his mission, or whether the rope would be of service when Duke reached his goal. Yet in every uncertainty in life one must simply attempt the thing that seems most intelligent. And Eugenia felt convinced that Duke would bring his friend back to her. Then she could decide on what should be done next.

Duke did seem to understand, for as soon as Eugenia had finished her task and commanded him to be gone, he trotted obediently off until his great shadow was lost in the distance.

Then the girl lay down again. She had natural self-control and her nursing had taught her even more. She must sleep if possible and in any case not let herself dwell on her own presence here within the field of the dead.

When Eugenia closed her eyes the moon had not risen and the night was fairly dark. Half an hour later, when she reopened them, a full moon had flooded the field with light. She could see Duke approaching at some yards away. He was moving slowly and it was difficult at first to find out the reason. Eugenia rose quickly to her feet. Yes, it was evident now: he was drawing someone along behind him.

The girl walked forward to meet the dog and his burden. Then, although she had been growing daily more accustomed to war and its inevitable sorrows, she stopped and drew in her breath sharply. The next instant Eugenia had

forgotten everything but that she was a Red Cross nurse whose purpose was to do whatever she could to relieve suffering.

The figure that the dog dragged along on the ground had the face turned downward. But when she lifted the body up Eugenia was not surprised to recognize in the white, still features, the face of young Captain Henri Castaigne. All along she had thought it probable that Duke could feel no such intense devotion for any one save his master.

After the dog's return the young officer had somehow managed to tie the long strip of cloth about his own body. He must have realized that he would lose consciousness on his journey to find succor, for he had been cruelly wounded in both legs.

Never before had Eugenia felt more painfully helpless. There were so many things which should be done for the young soldier at once and she was so unable to do any one of them.

Of course, she knelt and felt the action of his pulse and heart, finding neither so feeble as she had feared. Then Eugenia, who was given to definite actions, made another decision.

It would be impossible to be of service to Captain Castaigne here in an open field with no water near, so far as she knew. She had a little in the canteen in her pocket, but this would only be enough for him to drink and would certainly be insufficient for the cleansing of his wounds. Besides, even with the use of the small flashlight every Red Cross nurse carries, she was unable to discover whether the rifle balls were still imbedded in her patient's flesh. Certainly he must be carried to some place where he could receive proper attention, but in the meantime Eugenia thanked Providence that she had with her her bag of first aid appliances. It had been strapped about her waist while she sat under the tree earlier in the day, waiting to start out with the field hospital staff. Until now she had no thought or use for it.

Eugenia used the necessary antiseptics and then bound the wounds as carefully as possible. But she made no effort to bring her patient back to consciousness. For the purpose she had in mind it would be best that he feel and know as little as possible.

Once her task accomplished Eugenia again wound her improvised rope about Captain Castaigne's waist. Again she signaled Duke to start upon a journey, but this time she formed a member of the little party.

Her idea was to get the wounded officer back in the neighborhood of the field hospital, and then if she could find no aid there, somehow to reach their own farmhouse. From there word could be sent to the chateau.

But the trip was a terrible one and took longer hours than one could have imagined. Now and then Eugenia would try to assist by supporting the young officer's body with her own strength. But as she could not lift him entirely this only seemed to make the task more difficult for the devoted Duke. Often they were obliged to stop and then Eugenia would kneel down beside the body to find out if the young man was still alive.

It was about dawn when they arrived at last in the neighborhood of the former French field hospital, where the four American girls had been nursing. But Eugenia found few traces of the hospital left. Everywhere in the vicinity the ground had been trampled under foot. The white tents had been folded, and like the proverbial Arabian tents, had silently stolen away. Neither was there a single human being about.

However, Eugenia had anticipated this. But she had also steadfastly hoped that here upon more familiar ground she might make some useful discovery.

Ordering Duke to remain quiet beside his burden, Eugenia started upon a pilgrimage. She must find something to make the trip to the farmhouse more endurable, more possible for the young French soldier. Yet she could not make up her mind to desert him in order to seek for help.

At first, the girl could, of course, find nothing. But by wandering around on the outskirts of the grounds, where the deserted hospital had formerly stood, Eugenia finally came across an old wheelbarrow. It had been used for bringing vegetables to the hospital staff, and being of no value had been left behind.

Scarcely an ideal motor ambulance for a wounded officer. Nevertheless Eugenia seized upon the wheelbarrow with almost as much enthusiasm as if it had been. For at least it had wheels and she would be able to push it.

Naturally this was a hard task, but one should not think upon the difficulty when a task is to be accomplished.

The blue front door of the little farmhouse was standing open when Eugenia reached home. Half lifting and half dragging her patient, she finally succeeded in placing him upon a small couch in their living room.

Then, being the methodical person she was, Eugenia went directly to the kitchen, made herself a cup of coffee and drank it. For her strength had almost given out and she knew not what work might lie ahead of her.

CHAPTER XVII

Recognition

However, it was nearly noon before Eugenia made the discovery that the entire French army in the vicinity had retreated, leaving all the country nearby in the hands of the Germans. Only then did she appreciate the difficulty of concealing a young French officer in her home, who would doubtless be taken prisoner if his presence and his identity were discovered.

Her information came about in this fashion. For two hours Eugenia worked with her patient, washing his wounds and even managing to extract a bullet which had lodged near the surface. Also she bathed his face and poured brandy between his haggard lips until he opened his eyes, only to close them again in utter exhaustion. Finally, when she could do nothing more, Eugenia walked to her front door to get some fresh air. She meant in a few moments to go to the Chateau d'Amélie and send old François to the nearest village for a doctor. So far it simply had not occurred to her that François and his mistress might have deserted the chateau for the same reason that had compelled the removal of the field hospital.

Outside, like a tired sentinel, Eugenia found Duke asleep in the front yard. Then while hesitating to wake him, even to keep guard over his master, she became vaguely conscious that soldiers were marching past. The next instant she realized that their uniforms were German and not French and that they wore the eagle triumphant on their shining helmets.

They were passing close to the little "House with the Blue Front Door," so that Eugenia wondered why no one stopped to investigate it. Then she remembered that Barbara had hung the Red Cross emblem outside and that the soldiers were treating it with extraordinary respect.

Would they continue to do this after discovering that the only person beside herself under the protection of the Red Cross flag was an enemy's officer?

Eugenia was convinced otherwise. Captain Castaigne would be promptly taken prisoner so soon as she told of his whereabouts and sent to a hospital within the German lines. And to be moved at the present time would probably mean the young officer's death.

Calling Duke inside, Eugenia closed and bolted the blue front door. Then she considered whether she could manage to keep the young Frenchman concealed and yet take the proper care of him. It would be impossible to expect the assistance of a physician, for the nearest village would assuredly be occupied by the Germans and to demand a doctor must mean the betrayal of her patient.

It was possible, however, that she could hide Captain Castaigne away for a time at least, while she remained unmolested in the little farmhouse, with Duke as her protector. She would explain to the German officer in command just what had taken place that caused her to be left behind by the hospital staff. Then there would be little reason for interfering with her, unless the farmhouse should be required for the shelter of the soldiers. But as it was small and somewhat out of the way she hoped it might be ignored.

The chiefly important thing was to wait quietly until the next morning and then find out Captain Castaigne's condition. Eugenia meant to make as brave a fight for his life as possible. If he recovered there would be time enough to determine whether he should surrender or make an effort to escape and rejoin his command. Fortunately there were both provisions and medical supplies stored in the farmhouse. Judge Thornton had sent fresh orders of both from Paris quite recently.

So for the rest of the afternoon and evening Eugenia sat by her patient while Duke crouched on the floor near them both. No one disturbed them; the little house might have been in the center of a vast desert for any human interest it created. The day before Eugenia had closed its outside windows and doors, and since had opened only the one window necessary for light and air.

For the greater part of the night Captain Castaigne was delirious from a high fever. Eugenia knew that it would be almost impossible for him to escape blood poison, after the dirt had been ground into his wounds from the long dragging of his body on the earth.

Nevertheless, now and then the young officer slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, with Duke and Eugenia both slumbering beside him whenever this opportunity came.

Eugenia did not question the reason for her care. She had not liked the young Frenchman at their first meeting in Paris. Certainly their second accidental meeting in the woods had not increased her liking. Moreover, she had been entirely out of sympathy with him, with his mother and with their French ideas and environment on the afternoon of her one call.

Yet none of these things counted in the least with Eugenia. Captain Castaigne was a French soldier, one of the men whom she had come to Europe to nurse in case he needed her care. Therefore he should have the best it was in her power to offer.

Once, while in the act of giving him medicine to relieve his fever, the young man murmured his mother's name and for the instant Eugenia was moved to sympathy. All the rest of the time her feeling was entirely impersonal. Captain Castaigne was merely a patient who must if possible be kept alive and later restored to health. If she had any feeling in the matter Eugenia was sorry that she had ever made the young man's acquaintance before this night.

Nevertheless, at about six o'clock the following morning, after an entire hour of refreshing sleep, Eugenia opened her eyes to find her patient gazing steadfastly at her. For the time being his delirium had passed and she realized that he recognized her and longed to ask questions but was still too weak and ill to speak.

A half an hour afterwards, after a few sips of clam bouillon which chanced to be among the household stores, Captain Castaigne said a few words.

"*What does this mean?*" he asked in painstaking English, appreciating even in his present condition that Miss Peabody preferred the conversation to take place in her native tongue.

Eugenia thought quickly. The young officer could not entirely grasp the situation even if she were able to tell him the entire story. Moreover, at present the story was too long and too exciting for him to hear. Also, he might feel burdened by his obligation to her and unwilling for her to make the sacrifices necessary for his safety if he learned the truth now.

So she gazed back at him with the quiet serenity that made her so valuable a nurse.

“You understand you have been hurt? Well, I have been appointed to take charge of you. You are to see no one else for a time, not even your mother. Try to sleep now, for you must be as quiet as possible.”

When Captain Castaigne immediately closed his eyes, Eugenia choked back a sigh of relief. Evidently so far he had paid no attention to his strange surroundings. It was her presence alone that had surprised him, and he would probably be unable to make further inquiries for some time to come. Possibly he would not even recognize her again. For Eugenia understood the nature of the disease with which she was to do battle and realized that there might be weeks of continued delirium.

For the next fourteen days Eugenia was correct in her prognostication. But as they were a rather dreadful two weeks for her she would never talk of them freely afterwards. All that time she had but faint hope that the young soldier would live, and except for her patient and Duke she was completely alone.

However, Eugenia managed to get the young fellow upstairs and into Barbara's former blue bedroom, although he was never conscious of the change.

She was compelled to do this, or else have her patient discovered. For she was not to remain entirely undisturbed while the victorious German soldiers overran the entire neighborhood.

One afternoon, three days after their installation, when fortunately she chanced to be working in her kitchen, a tremendous knocking sounded upon the blue front door. Immediately Eugenia conceived that it was some one sent to inquire why a solitary female should remain sequestered in a house, when supplies and houses were so much needed for the German soldiers.

A satisfactory explanation would doubtless be difficult; nevertheless Eugenia, with a blue check gingham apron over her nursing one and a cup and saucer and dish towel in her hands, opened the front door.

There was something which she hoped looked “old maidy” in this suggestion of dishes and tea. Nothing to suggest the concealment of a young French officer!

Outside her door Eugenia encountered a stiff German youth in an immaculate uniform, bearing an official letter. The letter commanded

Eugenia to report to the officer in authority in the nearest village. She was to explain her presence in the neighborhood, her occupation, and above all offer proof of her nationality.

Therefore, before setting out the next morning Eugenia changed the quarters of her patient. There could be little doubt that some one would be sent to investigate the interior of the little "Farmhouse with the Blue Front Door." One could scarcely expect to keep a soldier hidden in the only room of any size in the house.

Fortunately Barbara's room was the most inconspicuous of the four bedrooms. Besides, Eugenia had a certain scheme in mind which she hoped might help when the critical moment arrived.

Naturally Eugenia had passports and certificates to identify herself as an American Red Cross nurse. But she also took with her to the colonel of the German regiment another paper of a different character. However, she did not mean to show this before feeling her way very carefully. The paper was a check for a large sum of money on an American bank in Boston and signed with her own name.

At the improvised office of the German colonel, Eugenia told her story as briefly as possible. Moreover, she told the exact truth in regard to herself in every detail up to a certain moment. This was the moment when she awakened to consciousness after being struck by a German shell.

There was nothing antagonistic in Eugenia's manner with the officer. She explained to him that the little French farmhouse had been allotted to the use of the four American Red Cross nurses and that the other three girls had retreated with the French field hospital staff. Then she asked that she be allowed to remain in their house until such time as she could communicate with her friends in America. As she was alone it would be impossible to have German soldiers quartered upon her.

At this moment Eugenia put her hand upon the check in her pocket.

Very frankly she then declared that she realized it to be each person's duty to assist with the shelter and feeding of a victorious army. But as she was unable to do either of these things, would not the colonel accept money instead? She trusted that he would not be offended by her unusual suggestion, for it appeared to her the only just and fair thing to do under the

circumstances. Finally after further discussion and hesitation and another careful study of her passports, the German officer agreed to do what Eugenia had suggested. However, he insisted, as a matter of necessary formality, that two German soldiers be sent to her house next day on a tour of inspection. When they came Eugenia had the courage to show them into the very blue bedroom where the young French officer lay concealed. But beforehand, and in spite of her Puritan ancestry, she explained that this room was her own bedchamber. Moreover, to prove that she had nothing to keep secret she had entirely emptied her closet. Her own clothes, beside all those that the other three girls had left behind, were thrown with pretended carelessness on top the very bed where Captain Castaigne lay hidden under a pile of bedclothes.

The young Frenchman was in a stupor from fever at the time, so Eugenia considered that there could be little risk of his either moving or speaking. However, if risk there was, she felt compelled to take it.

The German soldiers made no effort to give this special room a thorough investigation. They merely glanced in, and then, like the proverbial ten thousand men of King George's army, marched out again.

After this Eugenia was troubled no further by intruders from the ranks of the Allies' enemy. Her next visitor was of a much more unexpected character.

CHAPTER XVIII

Out of the Depth

All one night Eugenia feared that Captain Castaigne would die.

This was the fourteenth night after the beginning of his fever and a crisis in the disease. So for twenty-four hours she did not have one-half hour of uninterrupted sleep. It was not because the young man needed her constant care, for indeed he was never conscious of her existence. When he called it was always to ask for some one else, and yet it was always Eugenia who answered. Then for a little while at least the patient would seem to be satisfied.

But if at their first accidental meeting in Paris the four American Red Cross girls had considered Captain Castaigne absurdly young for his captain's commission, what must they have thought of him now? To Eugenia he appeared like a boy of sixteen.

It is true that he had a tiny dark moustache, but except for this his face remained smooth. Then his nurse had been compelled to cut off all his dark hair in order to cool his head, and his slender body had become wasted and his eyes sunken. Indeed, the features, which Eugenia had once considered too perfect for a man's, now frequently made her think of a delicate cameo, when he lay with his face in profile against the pure white of his pillow.

Watching him on this night, which she feared might be his last, Eugenia felt unusually moved.

After all, he must have been a brave and capable fellow to have received his present rank in the French army while still so young. Moreover, there was a possibility that Captain Castaigne had more force of character than she had ever given him credit for. Had he not rebelled against his mother's ideas of rank and dignity, and in spite of his devotion to her refused to keep his title in a country which was now a republic? Of course, Eugenia could not believe that the young man really had the true democratic spirit in which she so thoroughly trusted. Still there was a chance that he might not be so futile a character as she had first supposed.

Leaning over to wipe her patient's face with a damp cloth, Eugenia made up her mind to one thing. If Captain Castaigne died she would go at once to the German colonel in command of the French village and confess what she had done. Of necessity she must be punished for her falsehood and treachery, but surely she would be permitted to send for the Countess Amélie at the last. The young French officer could be of no interest to his enemies after his death.

But where the Countess could be hiding, nor whom she could find to send for her, Eugenia had not the faintest idea. For these past two weeks she had been so entirely shut away from the outside world. Except for her one visit to the German colonel she had never left the little "House with the Blue Front Door" since the night she first brought her patient into it. Nor had Eugenia received a single line from any one of the other three Red Cross girls to afford her the faintest idea of what could have become of them. But she did not worry so much as she might have done at a time when she was less occupied. Besides, naturally she believed that the three girls were with the French field hospital at some point back of the line of the French army's retreat.

Toward dawn Eugenia knew that the hour of greatest danger to her patient would arrive. For it is an acknowledged scientific fact that life is at its lowest ebb with the rising and the setting of the sun.

Therefore, just before this time Eugenia left her patient's bedside and went into the room adjoining, which she used for her own needs. There she washed her face and hands in cold water and, letting down her heavy hair, plaited it in two braids. She was very tired and yet must prepare herself to meet the coming hour with all the strength and wisdom she could muster.

Even as she made her toilet she was aware of the feverish muttering of the young officer. His stupor had passed several days before, but since his nurse could not decide whether his weak restlessness and almost incessant crying out were not worse symptoms. Certainly they were more trying upon her nerves.

"Ma mère, ma mère," he was repeating his mother's name over and over again, as if he must see her again before his spirit could leave his body.

Eugenia slipped back and for the hundredth time laid her hand gently on the young fellow's brow. Somehow he must be quieted, comforted into thinking his mother near him. Then if he never returned to consciousness he would pass out of the world's alarms with a sense of her presence.

Do you recall that Barbara Meade had discovered a wonderful, healing quality in the touch of Eugenia's hands? It is true that a few people have this vital, health-giving quality in their hands, which is not true of others.

Anyhow, Eugenia's patient grew quieter, although he still murmured a broken word now and then. He was strangely pathetic, because, however much he might move his arms and the upper part of his body, his legs remained lifeless. For now and then when he had endeavored to change his position the pain had been so great as to pierce through his stupor.

"Mon fils, mon fils," Eugenia whispered several times. It was all the French she dared permit herself to speak, and yet the simple words "my son," even spoken by a New England old maid, carried their magic.

Yet Eugenia was looking little like an old maid as she leaned over the French boy—and he was scarcely more than a boy. She wore the violet wrapper, and as she kneeled her long dark braids of hair lay upon the floor. She too had grown thin and white from her two weeks' vigil of nursing, cooking, taking entire charge of her patient, herself and the little house. Nevertheless, Eugenia's face had for some reason softened, perhaps because she was too weary and too selfless in her devotion to her patient to feel superior to any earthly thing. At this moment her eyes were both sad and hopeful, while her lashes looked longer and darker than usual against the pallor of her cheeks.

Finally Captain Castaigne moved away from the soft pressure of his nurse's hands. As he moved with more strength than Eugenia believed him to possess, for the next instant she watched him even more closely.

He was muttering a number of confused phrases, now and then what sounded like a command to his soldiers. Then all at once he stopped and laughed a little foolishly.

"Eugenia Peabody," he pronounced the words distinctly, although with a French accent which made the name more attractive than it ever had before. "Eugenié Paybodé" was the way it sounded to its possessor.

Eugenia stared more closely. Could Captain Castaigne know her once again? Since the first night after his injury he never seemed to have been aware of her identity.

A further glance into his eyes showed this was not true. There was no sign of intelligence there, only vagueness and a confused groping in the dark.

“Mademoiselle Paybodé, she is what you call in English ‘an old maid.’”

Then the young officer laughed boyishly, as if he and a friend had been discussing a new acquaintance and found the subject amusing.

Eugenia flushed. It was absurd, but for the moment she felt hurt and angry. Few of us like to be the subject of a joke and Eugenia was not gifted with much sense of humor. But a little later she had the grace to be ashamed of herself. However she might dislike the young Frenchman whom she had been nursing so faithfully, she must remember that he had unfailing good manners. Their one unfortunate meeting had been due to a mistake on his part. Afterwards he had done all that he could to make amends. Certainly he would be the last person to be rude to her under the present circumstances if he had known what he was saying! Moreover, the minute after he continued talking at random upon subjects which had no possible connection.

Soon after, glancing at her watch, Eugenia got up and crossed the room. The next instant she returned in order to take her patient’s temperature. His fever was not so high, but then his pulse and heart seemed to be growing dangerously weaker. Giving him the necessary stimulant, she again stood by his bedside, watching and waiting.

Captain Castaigne was no longer talking in his delirium. He had grown quieter and was staring, yet with an unseeing expression, at the ceiling overhead. At this moment Eugenia discovered that the dawn had come at last. A shaft of yellow light had entered the high window and shone across the wounded officer’s face. It gave him such a curiously transfigured look that for an instant Eugenia was frightened. But the next, realizing what had occurred, she walked across to the window and stood looking out at the country.

The morning wind blew across her face. The dawn was a cold December one and yet the air was grateful. A little later Duke came and thrust his great head into Eugenia’s hand. Until this moment he had not left his place

by his master's bedside since twilight the day before. But now he too seemed to feel that there was nothing more love or vigilance could do. One must simply wait.

The landscape was particularly lovely this morning, Eugenia thought. A white frost lay upon the meadows and trees like a veil, and one could not see the devastation that the recent fighting must have brought upon the countryside. Eugenia had the right to feel rather like a prisoner, and yet she was not at this time conscious of herself. She was wondering how the Countess Amélie could live when she learned that her only son had fallen a victim to the enemy who had despoiled her land and captured her home. She was an old woman and this would be too full a measure of sorrow.

How long Eugenia stood at the window she did not know. It could scarcely have been more than a few moments, yet when she turned around she was not aware of what had influenced her. Perhaps it was Duke's desertion, for once more he had marched over to his master's side. Here, he stood sentinel with his eyes fixed on the young captain's face. He no longer crouched upon the floor as he had been doing for the past twelve hours.

Straightway Eugenia experienced a sudden rushing of warm blood to her own cheeks and a flooding sense of happiness and warmth.

For Captain Castaigne was looking at her gravely, yet with entire recognition.

"I have come back to fight once more for France because of you," he whispered. Then, in spite of his exhaustion, he tried gallantly to lift Eugenia's fingers to his lips. But finding himself too weak, he simply lay still and smiled at her.

Utterly ridiculous in a self-possessed person like Eugenia! But because she felt a sudden overpowering inclination to burst into tears of relief at her patient's safety, she frowned upon him sternly instead.

"You are not to stir or speak until I return," she announced severely, and then deliberately left the room. Of course, she intended to get some simple nourishment for the young officer at once, but this was not the important reason for her withdrawal. Certainly Eugenia did not so far intend to forget her dignity as a nurse as to show emotion!

At about noon on the same day Eugenia was cheerfully working downstairs in the little French kitchen, while Captain Castaigne was sleeping quietly upstairs with the door open so that she could hear his faintest move.

For the kitchen had to be seriously considered. The supply of food necessary for an invalid was growing dangerously low in their larder, and for the next few weeks the wounded soldier must have proper nutriment. After an hour's investigation Eugenia decided that she must go to the village and see what could be done. It would be difficult to leave her patient alone, but his life was no longer in danger. Time would bring healing, if nothing of an unexpected nature occurred.

Then Eugenia heard a gentle tapping at her kitchen door. It was much the same noise that François had been accustomed to make on his daily visits with supplies from the chateau. For a moment Eugenia hoped that François might have come unexpectedly to their aid. But on opening the door, she found a wholly unexpected visitor.

A young girl of about sixteen stood outside. At first Eugenia did not recognize her. Then she saw that she wore a torn skirt and a little scarlet cap and that she was singularly pretty and graceful.

Like a flash a picture came before her; it was the figure of a little girl dancing before a group of French soldiers. What was the name Barbara had afterwards called her, the name of some character in an old French romance?

"Nicolette," Eugenia said suddenly. And drawing the girl inside the little kitchen, she carefully closed the outside door.

CHAPTER XIX

Eugenia

This year in the southern portion of France it was March, not May, that came singing over the land. The days were soft and serene with the warmth and sunshine of late spring.

In front of the Chateau d'Amélie a peacock walked slowly across the lawn, spreading his tail and then arching his neck in an effort to behold his own grandeur. Near him two girls were walking up and down with a young man dressed in the uniform of a British officer. Not far away in a somewhat neglected garden a French peasant woman was laying a cloth on a wooden table and setting out cups and saucers of fine old china. It was self-evident that an afternoon meal of some kind was in preparation and that the two girls and young man were waiting for it to be made ready, and perhaps for other guests as well.

This was all taking place in the very neighborhood which a few months before had been overrun by the German troops after the retreat of the French army. But the French had returned unto their own again, at least in this particular vicinity where the Chateau d'Amélie had stood for several centuries. Six weeks after their retreat before the superior forces of the German enemy, the French had retaken their deserted trenches, after driving the enemy out of the neighborhood. More than this, they had afterwards forced the Germans to retire a quarter of a mile further back beyond the borders of Alsace-Lorraine.

Therefore happiness, or at least a degree of it, reigned once more in this portion of France, and in no place perhaps was there a fuller share than in the Chateau d'Amélie.

“What do you suppose has become of Captain Castaigne? He promised to join us at four o'clock,” one of the girls inquired carelessly.

Before her question could be answered a wheeled chair appeared at one side of the garden with a young man seated in it. His face and figure suggested a semi-invalid, but his costume revealed extreme care and elegance. Moreover, his expression was radiant.

“Mes amis, you are more than welcome,” he cried, speaking a rather absurd mixture of French and English. Then turning to the little old man at the back of his chair he urged him to hurry, until the chair, its driver and rider, fairly rollicked over the uneven lawn.

There Captain Castaigne gravely shook hands with his guests, Nona Davis and Barbara Meade, who had just come to the chateau from the little “Farmhouse with the Blue Front Door.” Afterwards he smiled at his friend Lieutenant Robert Hume, who was at present a visitor in his house.

“Mother will be here in a moment,” he explained. “She has asked me to beg her adored American girl friends to wait a few moments until she is able to be with them. The truth is, Madame la Comtesse is at present engaged in making *petit gateaux*—little cakes, I believe you say. She would not trust the peasant Emma with so delicate a commission. But where is Mademoiselle Paybodé? Surely she has not forgotten her promise!”

Captain Castaigne’s face had suddenly changed; he seemed to be both annoyed and disappointed. So as usual Barbara spoke impulsively without thinking beforehand.

“Oh, Eugenia is so tiresome!” she began with a little stamp of her foot. “Nona and I thought all along up until the very last minute that she was coming with us this afternoon. Then she insisted that she had a slight headache and had best rest and read so it would not grow worse. The truth is, I don’t believe she wanted to come. Besides, she had the audacity to announce that she thought we would have a better time without her.”

Then Barbara ceased her confession, conscious that Nona was frowning upon her and that it was scarcely good manners to have spoken so freely. When would she ever get over her dreadful western candor?

“I am sure Barbara is mistaken in at least a portion of her tirade,” Nona interrupted. “Eugenia did have a headache or else she could not have failed to wish to spend the afternoon with Madame Castaigne. Really, I don’t think Eugenia is very well, although she will not admit it. But since we came back to the farmhouse she has never been just the same. She does not do half such hard nursing as she once did and yet she is often tired and unlike herself. I expect——” Then Nona stopped talking and laughed, for she had discovered Barbara smiling upon her with wicked satisfaction.

Having broken into the conversation to stem the flood of Barbara's tactlessness, she had now plunged in even deeper than her friend.

There was no one, however, to save her from the results of her stupidity, for Henri Castaigne had flushed and looked miserably uncomfortable as soon as she spoke.

"There is small wonder that Miss Paybodé is not so strong as she once was. When I think of all that she went through in those miserable weeks with me, I cannot see how she endured it. It must have killed any one else. Then there was the secrecy and the long concealment even when I had sufficiently recovered to have been made a prisoner by the enemy. Such strength, such courage! Mon Dieu, how shall I ever repay her?"

The young French officer looked so unnecessarily tragic that to save the situation his three friends laughed.

"Oh, goodness, you don't have to repay Eugenia! I am sure she really loved taking care of you," Barbara interposed. "Besides, I expect she bullied you abominably. She adores bossing people. But there is my Countess, I know she wishes to speak to me first, since I'm sure she likes me best. *Au revoir*." And Barbara ran off in the direction of the garden, where the figure of the Countess Amélie had just appeared, leaving her three companions to follow.

Nona then walked along by one side of Captain Castaigne's chair, with Lieutenant Hume on the other, while old François pushed nobly in the rear.

The French officer made no effort to hide his annoyance at Barbara's frankness. He was still weak and sometimes a little querulous after his long illness.

"Miss Meade does not understand, she does not appreciate Miss Paybodé," he began. "Even my mother, although she is on her knees to my friend because of her great kindness to me, even she cannot see all that Eugenie has been, all that she is——"

This appeared to be a conversation of unfinished sentences, of things better left unsaid, for Captain Castaigne now looked as if he would give a great deal to have kept his last remark to himself.

However, Nona Davis had the exquisite tact of many southern girls and apparently had heard only the first part of her host's speech.

“Oh, you must not misunderstand Barbara and Eugenia,” she explained. “Most of the time they disagree on every subject. But the truth is they are really tremendously fond of each other. Why, now that Mildred Thornton is in Paris with her brother Dick, I feel quite left out. Barbara used to weep for Eugenia every night after we made our escape with your mother and François through the passage under the chateau. You see when we learned that she was not with Mildred, but had been left behind, naturally we supposed that something dreadful had happened to her. And of course Barbara understood how self-sacrificing Eugenia always is and feared she had given her life for some one else. If you only knew how happy we all were when we finally learned that you were both alive and that Eugenia was caring for you!”

“But how did you hear?” Lieutenant Hume demanded. The little party had now almost reached the garden where the table was spread for their entertainment, so there was but little time for Nona’s story.

“Oh, we heard through a little French girl, Nicolette. You see, she came to the farmhouse one day to see Eugenia, and after they had talked a while Eugenia discovered that she was a friend of Captain Castaigne’s. Then she told her that he was in hiding. After that Nicolette used to come every day and bring supplies and seemed devoted to Eugenia. Well, you remember Madame told you how François finally made his way back to this neighborhood to try and find out what had become of Captain Castaigne. You see the Countess was in despair, as naturally we all believed that Captain Castaigne had been killed or taken prisoner, but François would not give up. He was unkindly treated by the Germans when he first came home, but afterwards they allowed him to work for them. Then of course he saw Nicolette and she told him what had happened. So we actually knew where Eugenia and Captain Castaigne were before we were able to get back here. But you can imagine how anxious we used to feel for fear they would be discovered and something dreadful done to both of them!”

“It is a perfectly ripping story,” Lieutenant Hume answered convincingly. But he added nothing more, as Madame Castaigne at this moment came forward to greet Nona. Actually the old French lady put both her hands on Nona’s cheeks and kissed her daintily on the lips. For the two young American girls had become her devoted friends and admirers during the weeks they spent together after their escape from the chateau.

An hour later they were still sitting talking cheerfully together in the old French garden. Only their host had disappeared. Captain Castaigne had asked to be excused, and as he was still an invalid no one thought seriously of his departure. Presumably he had retired to his own apartments to rest. But the young French officer had not felt like going indoors, although he was not in the mood for further conversation. As it was still early in the afternoon he had asked François to wheel his chair down into the woods which lay between the chateau and the little "Farmhouse with the Blue Front Door."

CHAPTER XX

The Pool of Truth

There by the pool on a log with a book in her lap sat Eugenia. She was not reading, however, although her book lay open. At the sound of Captain Castaigne's chair approaching she looked toward him.

The young man's expression was severe on this occasion, not Eugenia's.

"I am sorry to intrude upon you," he began stiffly. "Your friends told me that you were suffering from a headache; naturally I did not expect to find you here."

In response Eugenia smiled good-naturedly, just as one might to a fretful child. She had gotten up at once and now came forward and took the young man's hand.

"I did have a headache, Captain Castaigne. I am too good a Puritan to have told a complete story. But while I did not feel well enough to see and talk to a number of persons, I did not desire to go to bed, where Barbara was pleased to send me by way of punishment. Besides, I knew your mother would prefer to have the two girls to herself. I really think she misses them now that they can see so little of each other. But why talk about me? You are stronger every day, aren't you? Can't you walk with your crutches if François is near? Come, won't you try now? I am sure I can catch you if you are too much for François."

Two spots of angry color appeared in Captain Castaigne's cheeks.

"I am through with your support, Miss Paybodé," he returned curtly. "When I choose to walk I prefer not to be held up by a woman."

"Oh," Eugenia answered, and stared at her former patient helplessly. What had she said or done to make him so angry?

But the next instant the young officer had taken her hand and in French fashion touched it with his lips.

"Forgive me," he said, "I am impossible. This, after I depended on you so long for every care. If you will be so good, I think I should like to sit there

on the log where you were sitting.”

During his illness Eugenia had grown so accustomed to these swift changes of mood in her patient that she paid no especial attention to this one. Instead she helped him out of his chair and kept at his side while he hobbled over to the log she had just deserted.

But when she stood above him looking down upon him with pride and satisfaction over his achievement he grew angry again.

“If you cannot sit beside me I have no idea of taking your place,” he protested.

The next instant Eugenia sank meekly down. It rather amused her to have Captain Castaigne treat her in this fashion.

Just before them was the small lake which Nona and Barbara had discovered the first morning after their arrival at the farmhouse. It was shadowy now with the coming of evening, but still the water was coolly clear. Its beauty soothed one to silence.

It was Eugenia who spoke first.

“I am glad to have this moment here with you, Captain Castaigne,” she began, with a return to her former manner. “Because I wish to tell you and have you explain to your mother that Nona and Barbara and I may be leaving this part of the country in a little while. The truth is, our services as nurses are not needed here as they were some months ago. There is little fighting going on and several new French nurses came down from Paris the other day. Besides this, Mrs. Thornton and Judge Thornton have grown very nervous and unhappy over Mildred, as well as the rest of us, in the last few weeks. They have both written to urge me to persuade the other girls to join me and go into Belgium to help with the relief work there. You are almost well now, so I shall be able to say good-by with much greater satisfaction.”

This last speech Eugenia made in a gracious tone and yet her companion received it ungraciously. And this in spite of the fact that his manner was usually charming.

“There is no time when you would not say good-by to me with satisfaction, Miss Paybodé,” he returned. “However, if I am spared perhaps I may some

day show my appreciation of your great kindness. I have written my colonel to say that I shall be able to rejoin my command in another week or ten days. I have wasted much valuable time with two illnesses. Perhaps the third may be my lucky one!" he finished, casting his dark eyes upward with dramatic intensity.

In reply Eugenia actually patted his knee in a comforting, motherly fashion.

"Don't be absurd. You cannot return to your command for two or three months at least," she admonished.

"Two or three weeks shall be the limit to my patience," her companion repeated, still talking like a sulky boy.

Eugenia frowned. "I shall speak to your mother. She will never allow it." Again her manner was that of a New England school teacher. Nevertheless Captain Castaigne did not smile. Yet he seemed to have forgotten his age and dignity as well as rank in the army, for you see he had been a good many weeks under Eugenia's discipline.

"The day you go to Belgium I shall return to my post," he muttered.

Eugenia would like to have shaken him. Had he been in the little "Farmhouse with the Blue Front Door," she would simply have gotten up at this instant and left her patient until he had learned to behave himself. But at present the circumstances were different, and besides she might not have a chance to talk to him again. So somehow he must be made to behave sensibly.

"You will do no such thing. You owe more than that to me," Eugenia protested unexpectedly. A few moments before she would not have believed that any earthly thing could have forced her to mention, either to Captain Castaigne or to any one else, the sacrifices which she had made for him. But now she had spoken deliberately and meaning exactly what she said.

Nevertheless the young French officer did not answer immediately.

"Eugenié," he said finally, and the querulous, boyish note in his voice had quite gone, "you must listen to me. I have been talking like a child, but I am scarcely surprised at myself, since you have always insisted upon treating me as scarcely more than a child. I have borne with it because I have been

ill and you have known me only in that condition. But, Eugenié, I will endure it no longer.”

The young man’s voice held a quietly determined quality. He was perfectly courteous and yet his listener understood at this instant why he was considered one of the most forceful as well as one of the most popular of the younger officers in the French service.

Nevertheless Eugenia scarcely knew how or what to reply.

“I am so sorry, Captain Castaigne,” she answered. “I have not intended to fail in respect to you. But perhaps I have unintentionally presumed on your long weakness and dependence upon me.”

And this from Eugenia! Moreover, her face had flushed and she could not lift her lids because of the tears in her eyes. Yet she was not really angry with Captain Castaigne.

The next time he spoke his voice was once more gentle and he even managed to smile.

“You know that is not what I mean in the least. It is absurd of you to talk of showing proper respect to me, Eugenié, as if I were your commanding officer. Surely you understand that when a man cares for a woman as I do for you, there is but one thing possible between them. They must love each other fully and equally. I know you have nothing but a kindly feeling for me, but you shall not go away, when I may never see you again, without hearing the truth.”

Still Eugenia did not understand! Nevertheless her face grew pale instead of flushed and her dark eyes gazed into her companion’s almost curiously.

Yet the next moment, when Captain Castaigne touched her hand with infinite gentleness and respect, she drew it coldly away from him.

“I quite understand your gratitude, Captain Castaigne. But please appreciate the fact that it is unnecessary for you to go this far to express your obligation. I have only done for you what I would have done for any one in the world under the same circumstances.”

“I am entirely aware of that fact,” the young officer answered curtly.

Then he and Eugenia both maintained a dignified silence for the space of sixty seconds.

By this time the girl rose up.

“This is our good-by, perhaps. We may not see each other alone again. You must forgive me if I seem to be cold and unfeeling. Of course, I should have cared for any one just as I cared for you. But I should not have been so glad to have been given the opportunity had my patient been any other person.” Eugenia was trying her best to cast aside the cold and formal manner which had made her misunderstood all the days of her life. In her earnestness somehow she looked younger and humbler than usual. Indeed, she was a very fair and lovely woman standing there with her hands clasped before her. Her eyes were shining with the sincerity of her emotion, while her attitude expressed a strange mixture of dignity and appeal.

“When we first met each other, Captain Castaigne, I confess I had a wrong idea of you. Now I feel that I could have rendered France no greater service than to have saved your life. Since I came abroad to nurse in order to help the little I am able, perhaps my coming has not been in vain. Good-by.”

She was moving away, when the young officer reached out and took hold of her skirt.

“Please don’t go for another moment,” he pleaded. “Of course I understand that so noble a woman cannot love a man who has so little to offer as I have. Why, in spite of all our lands, my mother and I are little more than paupers! And if I am spared when this war is over, perhaps I shall always be lame.”

The girl was standing looking down at the young fellow whose head was slightly bowed, when instinctively she laid her firm, beautiful hand on his head with unconscious sympathy and tenderness. She had done the same thing so many times before during his illness. But Eugenia’s hand now trembled a little, for she was slowly beginning to appreciate what Captain Castaigne had been trying to say to her.

Curious, for Eugenia to think first that she had never received a proposal before in her life, or she might have known better how to receive it. Then her next sensation was an odd combination of gratitude and protest.

“I have been very stupid, Captain Castaigne, and you have been very good,” she answered. “But even if you believe what you have just said to me, and of course I know that you would not deceive me, you yourself must realize that nothing but friendship can ever exist between us. I am several years older than you, and I have no delusions about my own attractions. You are young and brilliant, but then I need not enumerate your gifts,” the girl added, smiling with a kind of gentle humorousness she had never possessed before. “All this is merely gratitude you feel toward me, and a little affection because of my care of you. Six months from now I shall be only a memory.”

“Then you *do not* love me?” Captain Castaigne inquired bluntly. He it was who had now cast aside all his soft graciousness of manner, the delicate evasions of the direct truth, that sometimes constitute what is known as a charming manner. It was Eugenia who, in spite of her Puritan faith and training, was refusing to meet the issue fairly.

She hesitated because the truth overwhelmed her. The idea of caring for Captain Castaigne except as a friend had never for a single instant before occurred to her. Of course, he had filled her life and thoughts for many weeks, but that was because of the peculiar situation into which they had been forced by circumstances. Moreover, the thought of their never meeting again had given her a sense of loss and emptiness. Yet Eugenia stuck by her colors gallantly.

“That is not the important question, Captain Castaigne, and I cannot answer you. For always there would remain an impossible gulf between us. There is your position, your mother’s disappointment, our different ways of looking at life. Why, you would soon become dreadfully ashamed of a New England old maid endeavoring to turn herself into a charming young wife.”

Eugenia glanced into the little pool of water near by, shadowed by the trees. “Nona has been calling this tiny lake ‘The Pool of Melisande,’ Captain Castaigne, but to me it is a mirror of truth, in which I can see myself only too plainly. It is growing late and you must not be out in the cold air. Please let me call François and have him take you home.”

Receiving no reply but a quiet look of determination, Eugenia summoned the old man. Then she assisted François to get the young officer back into

his wheeled chair and afterwards stood watching them until they had both disappeared.

Then, as it was almost twilight, Eugenia turned and began to walk slowly toward the little French farmhouse. She realized that she had just deliberately turned her back upon the fairest opportunity life might ever offer her. Nevertheless, both her conscience and her brain approved her action.

“There is only one thing which I might have confided and did not,” Eugenia murmured reflectively. “Perhaps I should have explained that it would not matter in the least that Henri and his mother have no money. I have more than enough for us all.” Then as she drew nearer home: “Never mind, Captain Castaigne will soon have forgotten what he has just said to me. But perhaps it is just as well that we are soon to go into Belgium to help with the Red Cross work there, for I may not find it quite so easy to forget.”

When she reached home it was dark. But as the other girls had not yet returned from the chateau, Eugenia went upstairs to her own room without making a light. There she flung herself down upon the bed, remembering gratefully that because she had a headache, she might reasonably be allowed to spend the evening alone. Then Barbara would have no chance to ask questions.

The third volume in the American Girls' Red Cross series is to be known as “The Red Cross Girls in Belgium.” In this story the four girls will be at work in an even more tragically interesting land. Here their adventures and their romances will continue and one of the girls at least shall find what is at once the end and the beginning of a girl's career.

The book will also deal with conditions in Belgium at the present time and show how the people of the United States have brought aid and relief to a suffering nation.



Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been made consistent.

Variations in spelling and hyphenation were retained as they appear in the original publication, except that obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

The following change was made:

[p. 179](#): " inserted (the enemy!" They)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RED CROSS
GIRLS ON THE FRENCH FIRING LINE ***

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